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# THE BEAUTIFUL WRETCH

THE

# BEAUTIFUL WRETCH

## THE FOUR MACNICOLS

## THE PUPIL OF AURELIUS

Three Stories, in Three Volumes

BY

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# THE BEAUTIFUL WRETCH

## CHAPTER I.

### SINGING SAL.

On a certain golden afternoon in August, when the sea was as still and radiant as the vaulted blue overhead, and when the earth was lying so hushed and silent that you would have thought it was listening for the chirp of the small birds among the gorse, a young girl of about seventeen or so was walking over the downs that undulate, wave on wave, from Newhaven all along the coast to Brighton. This young lady was tall for her age; slim of form;

and she had a graceful carriage; her face was fair and markedly freckled; her nose was piquant rather than classical; her hair, which was of a ruddy gold hue, was rebellious, and strayed about her ears and neck in accidental wisps and rings: her grayish or gray-blue eyes were reserved and thoughtful rather than shrewd and observant. No, she was not beautiful; but she had a face that attracted interest; and though her look was timid and retiring, nevertheless her eyes could, on occasion, light up with a sudden humour that was inclined to be sarcastic. So busy, indeed, was she generally, on these solitary wanderings of hers, with her own thoughts and fancies, that sometimes she laughed to herself—a low, quiet little laugh that none but herself could hear.

This was Miss Anne Beresford, who

was called by her sisters Nan. But it was an old friend of the family, and one of England's most famous sailors, who, at a very early period of her career, had bestowed on her the sobriquet of the Beautiful Wretch; and that partly because she was a pretty and winning child, and partly because she was in the habit of saying surprisingly irreverent things. Now, all children say irreverent things, simply because they read the highest mysteries by the light of their own small experiences; but Nan Beresford's guesses at the supernatural were more than usually audacious. When, for example, she arrived at the conclusion that fairies were never seen in the daytime for the reason that God had had them all 'fwied for his bweakfast,' it was clear that she was bringing a quite independent mind to bear on the phenomena of

the universe around her. And then, of course, all sorts of sayings that she never uttered or thought of were attributed to her. Whenever a story was particularly wicked, it was sure to be put down to Nan Beresford. The old Admiral, who had at the outset given her that nickname, spent a great deal of time that might have been profitably employed otherwise in deliberately inventing impieties, each of which was bruited about in certain circles as 'Nan's last;' and if you happened to meet him anywhere between the United Service Club and Spring Gardens, completely self-absorbed, his face brimming over with laughter, you might be sure he was just putting on a finishing touch. Rather than abandon one of these self-invented stories of his, I think he would have parted with any half-dozen of his crosses and medals;

but indeed this last would not have been difficult, for he had served in every part of the world where a ship would float, and honours and dignities had been showered upon him.

Naturally, there came a time when these stories had to cease; but Nan Beresford preserved her independent way of looking at things, and she was clearly the clever one of the family. Moreover, with all her retiring ways, she was always quite capable of holding her own. Her elder sisters were handsome, and a good many young gentlemen, amongst others, came about the house; some of whom, thinking to be facetious, would occasionally begin to tease Miss Nan, she being the youngest admitted to lunch or afternoon tea. But this shy, freckled young person, whose eyes could laugh up so quickly, had a nimbleness of

wit and dexterity of fence that usually left her antagonist exceedingly sorry. One can imagine a gay young swallow darting about in the evening, having quite satisfied himself as to food, and thinking only in his frolicsome way of chevying and frightening the innocent insect tribe. But what if, by dire mischance, he should dart at something and find he had seized—a wasp! Some of the merry young gentlemen were glad to leave the Beautiful Wretch alone.

However, all these things must now be looked upon as bygones. Seventeen has come; its dignity and seriousness have followed upon the frolics of untutored youth; and the sweet charm of maidenhood has smoothed down such angularities as were formerly permissible. If Miss Anne Beresford shows her independence

now, it is mostly in a sort of half-declared contempt of sentimentalities and flirtations —of which, to be sure, she sees a good deal around her. She likes to be alone; she reads much; she has ideas; she worships Mr. Huxley; and she needs no other company than her own when she goes off on long explorations of curving shore or inland vale. On this particular afternoon, for example, she was walking all the way to Brighton from Newhaven, having already walked to the latter place in the morning; and as her light and free step carried her over the close, warm, thyme-scented turf, she was smiling to herself —at some incident, no doubt, that her memory had recalled.

Well, at this moment some one addressed her.

'Young lady!'

She had been vaguely aware that a woman was sitting there, by the side of some furze bushes; but she had kept her eyes away, being a little afraid of tramps. On being challenged, however, she turned and looked, and then she saw that this was no ordinary tramp, but an itinerant musician well known along the south coast by the name of Singing Sal. She was a good-looking, trimly-dressed, strapping wench of five-and-twenty, with a sun-tanned face, brilliant white teeth when she laughed, and big brown eyes that were at once friendly and audacious in their scrutiny. She looked indeed more like a farmer's daughter dressed for market-day; but on one side of her, on the green-sward, lay a guitar; and on the other, a little leather wallet that she had unstrapped. Apparently she had been having a nap on this

warm afternoon, for she was smoothing down her black hair.

'I beg your pardon, Miss,' she said, with very great respect, but with a sort of timidly friendly look in her eyes, 'but I have often seen you as you was walking along the downs; and many's the time I have wished to have a word with you, if there was nobody by. Yes, and many's the time I have thought about you.'

Nan Beresford hesitated for a second whether she should stay or not. But she knew this young woman very well by sight; and her appearance and manner were alike extremely prepossessing. Nan had heard her sing, but never speak; and she was surprised by the correct way in which she spoke; she had scarcely anything of the Sussex intonation.

'Yes,' said Singing Sal, looking up at the young lady, 'many's the time that I have thought I should like to tell you what I've been thinking about you, as I saw you go by. I've often been thinking that if one could only see into it, the mind of a young lady like you—brought up like you in the middle of nothing but kindness and goodness—why, it must be the most beautiful thing in the world. Just like that out there—clear and silver-like.'

She nodded in the direction of the sea—where the pale blue plain was touched here and there with silver and golden reflections. Nan was embarrassed; nevertheless she remained. There was something winning about the fresh-coloured, frank-eyed lass.

'And I think I have seen a little bit into your mind, Miss,' said she, with a

smile. 'Would you look at this—if I may make so bold?'

There was a bit of red silk round her neck, and attached to it was a florin. She held up the perforated coin, and glanced at the face of the young girl. Nan Beresford blushed.

'You remember, Miss? That was the night as I was singing in front of the Old Ship, though what I did that for I don't know; I prefer my own friends and my own haunts. But do you know what I said to myself when I got to my lodgings that night? I said, "What was the young lady thinking of when she gave you that florin? It wasn't an accident; for she took it carefully out of her purse. And it wasn't because she thought you were starving; for you don't look like that. No, she gave it to you that you might

think it enough for one night's earnings, and go away home, and not be stared at any longer by a crowd of men. That was what the young lady was thinking in her mind; and if ever you spend that two shillings, Sal, you'll be a mean wretch." And many's the time I thought I would like to speak to ye, Miss, if only as it might be to ask your name.'

This woman was frank even to boldness in her scrutiny, and her manner was rough and ready; but there was a touch of something fine about her—something true, downright, unmistakable—that somehow won people's confidence. Nan Beresford drew nearer to her, though she remained standing.

'Is there anything——?' said Nan; and then she stopped. She was about to ask if there was anything she could do for

this new acquaintance; but she suddenly reflected that the young woman was smartly dressed and apparently well-to-do. Singing Sal quickly broke in on her embarrassment.

'Yes,' she said, smiling, 'you don't like my making a show of myself—singing for coppers in the street. But isn't there worse than that among the people you live among, Miss? Mind, I see life in the rough; I can't always choose my company; and I have to take things as they come; but when I hear of very fine young ladies—mind, not poor girls driven by starvation, or forced to support a sick mother, or kicked out of doors by a drunken father—and these fine ladies going and selling themselves for so many thousands a year and a swell carriage—well, it sounds queer, I think. But I'm

sure, Miss,' she said, regarding the girl, 'you won't make a marriage for money. You don't look like that.'

Again Nan Beresford flushed hastily; and she said, with a touch of anger, 'I prefer not to speak of such things. I am tired of listening to women who can talk of nothing but sweethearts and marriage. Surely there are other matters of as much importance——'

But then it occurred to her that this was scarcely civil; so she turned to this pleasant-looking stranger and said, with a grave courtesy, 'I presume you are returning to Brighton?'

'Yes, I am.'

'To remain there?'

Sal laughed in her quiet way.

'Lord love you, my dear young lady, I never saw the town yet that could hold me

for more than a couple o' nights. I live in the open. This is what I like best—open sea, open sky, open downs. I do believe my forefathers were either gipsies, or else they had had a good dose o' the treadmill; for I'm never content but when I'm on the trudge—wet weather or fine, all's the same to me; but four square walls I can't endure.'

'I am afraid you must lead a very solitary life,' said Nan, with sincere compassion.

'Why, bless you, Miss, the world is full of things,' said the other cheerfully; 'and as you tramp along there's always something turning up for you to look at. Oh, I've plenty of friends, too, for the matter of that. I bring a bit of news to the farms, and sometimes toys for the coastguardsmen's children — else the women would

get jealous; and I have an eye for the mackerel-shoals, for the fishermen; and I know where the sailors are, if there's any sport going on. Yes, I have a good many friends, Miss. I can tell you it would be a bad business for any one who laid a finger on me, anywheres between Dover and Portsmouth; I think the word would be passed along pretty quick. Not that I can't take care o' myself,' added Sal with a modest smile. 'I'm not afraid to be out o' nights, when I know where my bed is; and sometimes I can do without that. Why, that is the best of all the tramps—a clear moonlight night along these downs; and you have the whole world to yourself; everything and everybody asleep, except, maybe a watchdog up at one of the farms. And the ships out at sea—you can tell whether they're going up or down Channel

by the red or the green light, and you think of the poor chap at the helm, and hope he'll get soon home to his wife and children. That is a real fine tramp, Miss; you want to sing almost, and yet it's too beautiful to be broken by a sound. And then there's a fortnight in the Spring when the birds come over—oh! that's wonderful. If you start about half-past two or a quarter to three, you get in amongst them; and the first thing you hear is the whistle, quick, and sharp, and yet far away, of the curlews. Then you begin to feel that they are passing overhead; you can't see anything; it is like a whisper filling all the air; the darkness is just full of wings—soft and soft; you're afraid to put up your hand in case you might hurt some poor creature at the end of its long voyage; and you listen and listen as you walk along, waiting for

the gray daylight in the east, to show them where to pick up some food in the fields. Ah! Miss, if you only had the courage to rise as early as that——'

'Oh, I will—I will!' said Nan eagerly, quite forgetting what her mother might have to say about this strange acquaintance. 'But what has made you take to such a way of living? You are very well educated.'

'You are kind to say so, Miss,' remarked Singing Sal, who was evidently greatly pleased. 'But it's little education I ever got, except from two or three books I have made companions of, like. I kept my father's shop in Tunbridge until he married a second time; then it grew too hot for me, rather; and so I took to the road, and I've never regretted it. Human nature is what I like to look at; and if I may make

so bold as to say it, I guess there's more human nature among the poor folk than among the rich. But I'll tell you about that some other time,' she added, returning to her ordinary free-and-easy manner. 'I see you want to go. You've looked at your watch twice.'

'But you're going to Brighton also?' said Nan, somewhat timidly.

'Not with you, Miss,' was the prompt reply. 'No, no. But perhaps, if it is not making too free, you will be so friendly as to tell me your name?'

'My name is Anne Beresford, and I live in Brunswick Terrace,' said Nan.

'Thank ye kindly, Miss,' said Singing Sal, regarding the young lady with great friendliness and respect. 'Maybe I shall see you some other day on the downs, for

I think you are as fond of them as I am myself. Good-bye, Miss.'

She rose with some sense of natural courtesy. But she rather turned away, also; and she kept her hands behind her. So Nan bade her good-bye in return; and continued on her way along the lonely cliffs.

Some considerable time thereafter, when Nan Beresford was nearing Brighton, she turned and looked behind her; and she could make out, on the summit of one of the rounded undulations towards Rottingdean, the figure of a woman, whom she at once guessed to be Singing Sal. That solitary figure was impressive there—high up on the edge of the slope; the still, shining sea far below her; and all around her and illumining her, as it were, the reddening glow flooding over from the westering

sun. Nan—perhaps moved by some subtle compunction, perhaps only in token of friendly remembrance—took out her handkerchief and waved it twice ; but there was no response.

## CHAPTER II.

### IN BRUNSWICK TERRACE.

That same afternoon all Brighton was astir with curiosity because of a large vessel that had slowly come in from the west before an almost imperceptible breeze. She came unusually, and, as some thought, dangerously close in shore; and no doubt she looked even larger than she really was, for she had every stitch of canvas set, from her royals down to her lower studding sails, that stood out on each side like great bat's wings; while all this mass of sail was dark in shadow against the western glow. As

the spectators watched her, those among them who knew a little about nautical matters guessed that this must be a man-of-war from the rapidity with which she began to furl her sails—letting the golden light shine along between her spars; while they further concluded, from the fact that only a kedge was thrown out at her bows, that her stay in these shallow waters would be brief.

Now we must see how the advent of this stranger was regarded by the occupants of a certain drawing-room in Brunswick Terrace. These were five—a mother, son, and three daughters; and as they will all appear, more or less, in the following history, it may be as well to introduce them now and categorically to the reader.

First of all came Lady Beresford herself—an elderly, sallow-faced, weak-looking

woman, the widow of a General Officer who had got his K.C.B.-ship for long service in India. She had a nervous system that she worshipped as a sort of fetish; and in turn the obliging divinity relieved her from many of the cares and troubles of this wearyful world. For how could she submit to any discomfort or privation (the family were not very well off for their station in life); or how could she receive objectionable visitors, or investigate cases of harrowing distress, or remonstrate with careless livery-stable keepers, or call to account extortionate milliners when this precious nervous system had to be considered? Lady Beresford turned away from these things and ordered round her bath-chair, and was taken out to the end of the Pier, that she might be soothed by the music and the sea air.

The eldest daughter in this drawing-room (the eldest daughter of the family was married and in India) had not much nervousness about her. She was a handsome, tall, blonde girl of the clear-cut English type, cold and even proud in manner, strict in the performance of all her duties, and not very charitable in her criticism of others. She had a good figure; she dressed well; clear health shone in her pale, fair face and bright, cold eyes. She was a daring horsewoman. Her brother called her 'Nails,' which was a final contraction for 'Old Hard-as-Nails.'

The next sister, Edith, that same graceless youth was in the habit of calling 'The Sentimental.' She was the darkest of the family, and the most beautiful also, where every one was more or less good-looking. She had soft brown hair, dark blue-gray

eyes of the tenderest expression, and a beseeching innocent look. She was fond of music; played and sang very fairly herself; but she was most admirable as a listener. In a room filled with half-murmuring people, she alone remained mute and devoted; her chair drawn close to the piano; her form motionless. It is true her brother boldly attributed Edith's strict observance of this attitude to the fact that she knew she had a striking profile, and that in no other way could she be so well seen by the room. But then there are some people who will say anything.

In point of family order Nan Beresford came next; but, as we have seen, she was at this moment away out on the downs, marching briskly, and much pleased with herself and the world generally.

'The Baby' was the youngest of the

sisters—a pretty child of fifteen; a trifle spoiled and bad-tempered, otherwise characterless enough. So now we may pass on to the personage who considered himself of chief consequence in the house—Mr. Thomas Beresford, the only son, who now stood at the window, thrumming on the panes, to the infinite annoyance of his mother. He was an exceedingly handsome boy of about eighteen, slightly built, tall, and dressed with an elaborate precision. The lad was clever enough, and good-natured enough, but he had been spoiled all his life long—first by his sisters, and then by the men who wanted to marry his sisters. He harried and worried the whole household indiscriminately, but he was especially hard upon Nan. He said Nan had a character that he wished to form. Girls wanted roughing. There was far too

much flimsiness and fashionability about their social circle. In time he trusted to be able to make something out of Nan.

Well, he was thrumming contemplatively on the window-panes, watching this big, dark ship come along from the west.

'Thomas, I wish you would cease that distressing noise,' said his mother, with a plaintive sigh.

He ceased his thrumming and took to whistling.

'Tom,' said the musical sister, 'I do wish you wouldn't try to pick up new airs. You can't do it. Why don't you keep to "Home, Sweet Home," or "In a Cottage near a Wood"?——'

But, to give effect to this remonstrance, she had turned in her chair in which she was reading, and, in so doing, came in

sight of the window, and the sea, and the new arrival there.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, 'what a beautiful large yacht!'

The youth at the window shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, you *are* a fool,' he said politely.

'Thank you,' she replied.

'I'll tell you what—it's a man-o'-war brig,' continued he, with an air of importance. 'And what's more, I hope the fellow knows where he's coming to. I don't see them taking any soundings; and the notion of bringing a man-o'-war in here'——

He went and got an opera-glass, and returned to the window. He would make observations; perhaps, if need were, he might put off in a small boat and offer to assist in the navigation of the ship.

'Young women,' he exclaimed, suddenly, 'a light strikes me. That's the *Fly-by-night*.'

'You pretend you can make out the ship's name at that distance,' said the eldest sister, with the slightest of smiles.

'Not with the glass, but by the intuition of genius,' he retorted, coolly. 'What's more, I can tell you the name of her commanding officer, Miss Nails. Which his initials are Francis Holford King.'

'King?' said his mother with but little interest. 'Oh, yes; I remember.'

'And he's coming to pay you a visit; that's what's the matter,' continued the youth, still with the glass raised. 'Nails, you'd better hide that novel, and pretend you've been sewing. Beauty [this was an alternative name for the second sister], are you at the proper angle? Baby, smooth out your pinafore.'

'Thomas, I insist on your treating your sisters with more respect!' his mother said, angrily.

'Well, I should almost like to be that fellow,' continued Thomas, with perfect good-humour. 'Fancy: at five-and-twenty, commanding a ten-gun brig! He has brains, that chap; not like the others that come fooling around here. Why, old Stratherne told me all about him. They made him a Lieutenant when he was just of age.'

'With your abilities, Tom,' said his eldest sister, 'I suppose you'll be commanding one of her Majesty's ships, too, when you're five-and-twenty.'

He was not at all crushed by the sarcasm.

'My abilities,' he said, still looking through the glass, 'are, I know, remark-

able; but I think, on the whole, a rich widow will be more in my line of country.'

By this time all the girls had come to the window to watch the busy scene without—the small sailing-boats and rowing-boats passing and repassing under the bows and stern of the brig, their occupants staring at the guns in the open ports or listening to the fiddling on the forecastle, where the men were dancing. But the interest of the Beresfords was concentrated rather on the gig that waited below, at the foot of the accommodation-ladder, with five blue-jackets in her. They saw an officer descend and step into the stern of the gig; then she was shoved off, and simultaneously the oars struck the water. In a very few minutes the bow of the boat was run up on the beach, the gangboard put out, and then the officer stepped ashore.

'Oh, my! ain't we resplendent?' remarked the brother of the girls, apparently to himself. 'But it will be mortally awkward, young sir, if your ship should get aground, with the tide ebbing. Lawks-a-mussy! a court-martial. Even your first-class certificates, and Sir George Stratherne, and all the Lords put together, couldn't get you out of that. And, then, the ignominy of it! *Question:* What on earth made you take the *Fly-by-Night* in to Brighton? *Answer:* Please, sir—ax yer pardon, sir!—I only wanted to spoon one o' them doosid pretty Beresford girls.'

'Thomas, leave the room!' said his mother, in a violent rage.

Thomas could not help it; he had to go. But he said as he passed by her,

'Take care, mother; you are involv-

ing yourself in something serious. Her Majesty's brig *Fly-by-Night* will be aground in about two twinkles!'

A few minutes later Lady Beresford was handed a card, inscribed 'Lieutenant Francis Holford King, R.N.;' and shortly thereafter the owner of the card presented himself in the drawing-room. Now, there can be no doubt that her Majesty's uniform, especially when women-folk are the spectators, lends a certain dignity to the human figure; but, even in ordinary dress, this new-comer would have seemed to most a manly-looking, well-built young fellow, who had some decision in his face, and a very straightforward way of looking at people. He was of middle height, slight and square-shouldered; his forehead square; his hair black, likewise the short moustache twisted at the ends; while his eyes were of that

singularly dark and luminous blue that one never sees, oddly enough, except in the eyes of sailors. However, there was nothing of the robustious, shiver-my-timbers, conventional sailor about him; his manner was somewhat reserved; he had a touch of gravity beyond his years; perhaps he had acquired it through being put at an early age in command of so many men; but it never forsook him—not even in the ward-room, among his brother officers.

He seemed shy, also. When he had shaken hands with Lady Beresford and her daughters, and sat down, there was a distinct flush on the sun-brown face; and he proceeded to say, hastily,

'I—I heard you had come down here at the end of the season, Lady Beresford—Admiral Stratherne told me—and I had

a telegram to send off; so I thought I might take the chance of finding you not gone abroad yet.'

'I am not going abroad this year,' Lady Beresford said, wearily. 'Really my nerves cannot stand the perpetual fatigue and worry of the railway stations and hotels. But the girls are going—by themselves. It is becoming quite common now. They don't want even to have a maid with them; and really I am ashamed of the attention I require——'

'Nan is going with us too,' said Miss Beresford, staring into the fireplace, where there was no fire.

'Oh! indeed,' said the grave young lieutenant.

'She has never been abroad before. Won't her eyes grow big! She has a great capacity for wonder and admiration;

she will do all our reverence for us at the proper shrines.'

'You have seen Sir George recently, then?' said Lady Beresford.

'At Portsmouth last week. They were all down from the Admiralty.'

'What a dear old gentleman he is!' she said.

'He is the finest sailor and the best-hearted gentleman in her Majesty's service —and that's not saying a small thing,' was the answer, prompt and straight.

'You are a great pet of his,' said Miss Beresford, 'are you not?'

'He has been a very good friend to me. But you needn't imagine it is because of that I respect him—that I more than respect him—I love him.'

There was a touch of earnestness in his voice and in the simplicity of the phrase,

that made Miss Beresford regard him for a second with almost wondering eyes. She had never seen, for her part, anything about Sir George Stratherne to be enthusiastic about.

However, she had to continue the conversation unaided, for her mother was too languid. Beauty had got into an effective position, and was content to be silent, while the Baby was useless. So she said with a smile,

'I hope Sir George won't have to find fault with you for bringing your ship into these shallow waters. Tom—my brother Tom, you know—is very anxious about it. I think he would like to give you his advice.'

'I should be glad to have it,' said Lieutenant King, with befitting gravity, 'but I do not think we are in any great danger. And how is your brother?'

'Oh, very well; I mean very ill. Worse than ever. I wish you could take him with you for a cruise or two.'

'As they used to take a cask of raw Madeira,' said he, laughing heartily, 'to fine down? Well, you're right about one thing; there's some good stuff in the lad. He might fine down to something good. But he is not in proper guidance.'

'He is in no guidance at all,' sighed his mother.

'Is he going abroad with you?'

'Not he,' said Miss Beresford. 'He wouldn't be bothered with us girls. He will see us as far as Newhaven, perhaps, and make brutal jokes all the way about the Channel.'

'You are going soon, then?' said he. Somehow there was a kind of constraint about this young lieutenant's manner.

He seemed to be thinking of something or some one else. His remarks and questions were of the most conventional sort.

'On the 1st of September I think we shall be ready to start.'

'And are you going far?' he said, in the same preoccupied way.

'To Lucerne, first, I imagine; and then over the Splügen, when it is cool enough to go into Italy.'

'Oh, indeed!' said he. And then he added, after a pause, 'Oh, indeed!'

Then he rose.

'I see my man has got back,' he said. 'I am sorry, Lady Beresford, I cannot ask you to bring your daughters to look over the ship; we must be off directly. Some other time, perhaps. It would give me very great pleasure, indeed. I hope, Miss Beresford, you will have a pleasant journey.

I have been thinking of going abroad myself this autumn if I can get sufficient leave. Will you remember me to your brother Tom?'

He bade them good-bye, and left. They were silent until they saw him cross over the King's Road. Then the business of criticism began.

'He doesn't talk like a sailor at all,' said the Baby, with a pout. 'He talks just like anybody.'

'At all events he is very good-looking,' said Beauty, warmly. 'He has the loveliest eyes I ever saw in a man. And his hands—did you notice his gloves?'

'A sailor shouldn't wear gloves,' said the Baby, who had not seen Lieutenant King before, but had heard of him, and was disappointed that he did not correspond to the nautical heroes she had read of.

'I think gold lace is far better on blue than on scarlet,' said Beauty. 'I think blue and gold looks better than anything in a ball-room.'

'He didn't tell us a single wonderful story,' said the disappointed Baby.

But Mary Beresford's comment was more odd still. She glanced at her mother, and laughed. 'Mother, he didn't even once mention Nan's name.'

## CHAPTER III.

### A FIRST BALL.

Nevertheless, Lieutenant King was quite as well acquainted with Nan Beresford as he was with the other members of the family —and this was how he came to know her. The Beresfords had for many years been the intimate friends of the Strathernes; and though they saw less of each other since Lady Beresford, on becoming a widow, had gone to live permanently in Brighton, still the London season brought them in a measure together again. Lady Beresford took rooms in Bruton Street

during the fashionable months of the year for herself and her grown-up daughters; and from time to time, and as a great treat, Nan was allowed to come up for a few days from Brighton. On these rare occasions, if Sir George heard of the Beautiful Wretch being in town, nothing would do but that she should come with her mother and sisters to lunch in Spring Gardens—he being at this time Senior Naval Lord. And Nan was rejoiced. She was not at all a foolish young virgin; she was well aware of the affection the old Admiral had for her; and while she heartily reciprocated it, she knew that his special patronage of her gave her a sort of distinction among her sisters.

Well, one of these opportunities arrived, and Nan, not a little elated, but outwardly very demure, drove away with her mother

and sisters, in a hired brougham, to New Street. In due course they arrived at their destination, and they had just got inside the door when, as chance would have it, Sir George himself came from the dining-room into the hall. He was a wiry-looking, handsome, elderly man, with grizzled hair, a firm face, and the kindliest of gray eyes; while on this occasion he was very gorgeously attired, for he had already dressed for a Levée, and, moreover, it was a Collar Day. It was extraordinary to see how naturally Nan went up to him, taking it for granted he would scarcely have a word for anybody else. And he hadn't. Of course he shook hands with Lady Beresford and Mary and Edith, and welcomed them in a kind of way; but it was Nan that he seized with both hands; and it was Nan that he himself escorted up stairs to

the drawing-room; and it was Nan that he presented to Lady Stratherne, just as if there was nobody else in the world. Lady Stratherne, though she was also a miracle of kindness, knew her duties better, and busied herself with the others, leaving those two to themselves.

'Well, now,' said the old sailor, briskly, 'what is our first dance to be?'

'I beg your pardon, Sir George?' she said.

'Why, don't you know, girl, that you're coming to the ball?'

'What ball, Sir George?' said she, quite innocently.

What ball, indeed! And she had heard her sisters speak of nothing else for a fortnight.

'Why, my ball; our ball, everybody's ball! Why, don't you know that the world

is going to stand still on Thursday night—in amazement. And if you didn't know, now you know; and that's the ball you're coming to, as sure as my name is Jack Horner—now, now, I've set my mind on it——'

Nan was no longer a hypocrite. Her heart began to beat rapidly—not with joy, but with fright.

'Oh, Sir George, I—I never was at a ball—I—I never go out—mamma would never dream——'

He turned and sung across the room—

'Mother!'

The lady who was addressed in this homely fashion was herself far from homely: she was a distinguished-looking woman, with pale, refined features, and a singularly intelligent and sweet expression.

'Mother, this girl is coming to the ball

on Thursday, whether she likes it or not. I want a partner; I insist on having a partner. Get a card and invite her—a card all to herself—her name in capital letters—the honour of the company of the BEAUTIFUL WRETCH: will that do?'

Lady Stratherne said nothing at all, but regarded the other mother with a sort of puzzled smile.

'Oh, Sir George!' Lady Beresford protested, 'it is impossible. Thank you very much—but it is impossible——'

'Impossible?' he cried. 'We don't know what that is at the Admiralty. The men who write in the newspapers expect us to be able to do everything at a moment's notice; and of course they're right; and so of course we can do it. And so can you; the end of the argument being that Nan is coming to our ball on

Thursday night, as I'm a living Dutchman.'

But the matter was not so easily settled. There was a fierce fight. It was ridiculous that a school-girl, who ought to be walking two and two along the Marine Parade, should go to one of the big balls of the London season. How could a ball-dress be got ready by Thursday night? And so forth: and so forth. Sir George paid no attention to all this firing of cotton pellets. She was coming to the ball on Thursday night, he maintained with a dogged obstinacy worthy of Nelson. And the end of it was that before they went down to lunch it had been finally agreed that Nan was to come to this ball; her mother remarking to Lady Stratherne, with a sigh of resignation—

'I can't imagine what Sir George sees in that gawky child.'

Now, we have it on the best authority —or what ought to be the best authority— that is to say, we have it from a multitude of lady-writers, that the prospect of going to a first ball is one of the great joys of a young girl's life. The present writer, at all events, is not bold enough to impeach such an array of witnesses, and will only state the simple fact that in the case of Nan Beresford this prospect filled her mind with nothing but terror and dismay. It was in all sincerity that she had besought Sir George to let her off; though she might as well have gone down on her knees to the Monument. He could not understand why a young girl of seventeen should be really reluctant to go to a dance —and a very pretty dance, too, for the

rooms were to be decorated with flags. And when Nan told her mother and sisters that she would far rather not go to the ball, her mother fancied she was afraid that her dress, being hurriedly made, would not compare well with her sisters' long-studied costumes, while the sisters simply said to each other, 'Oh, she knows she can't dance.'

There was some little truth in this last remark. Although she lived in a well-frequented house, where there were plenty of people coming and going, Nan had grown up very much apart. She had her own ways and occupations, which were mostly solitary. And dancing had never been a favourite amusement of hers. Of course, in the evening, when some young people were present, there was frequently a carpet-dance improvised; and then some-

times Nan was dragged in to make up a set at some square dance. She got through it mechanically; but it afforded her no special pleasure; and as for round dances, she said they made her giddy, and so she got excused. Giddy she said; and yet she could walk, without the slightest sensation in the brain, along the extreme verge of those high chalk-cliffs, to watch the jackdaws, and hawks, and gulls at nest-building time, and she could swing for an hour in a trapèze, so long as the seat was comfortable and you gave her a book to read.

Not that she at all played the part of Cinderella in the house. Her mother was exceedingly fond of her—partly, perhaps, because Nan alone took the trouble to humour all her mysterious nerve-miseries; while her sisters tolerated her, though they

thought her unsocial. Even this dress, when it did appear—and a thousand times Nan had inwardly prayed that it might not be ready in time—was quite as pretty as theirs. It was very pretty indeed; but, somehow, Nan, as she regarded herself in the big mirror, convinced herself that there was not enough of her to carry off a ball-dress. Her sisters had a certain 'presence' that a grand costume became. She thought she was too thin—that she looked more like a school-girl than ever; and she wished that she were not freckled. When, at last, she was in the carriage with the others—Mr. Thomas had gone in a hansom rather than ride with the coachman—she said, cunningly,

'Mamma, dear, I am sure you will be excited with speaking to so many old friends; and you know your nerves cannot

stand it. Let me sit by you, and take as much of the talk as I can. I really don't care to dance. I would rather not dance. I would far rather sit by you, mamma. And I am sure it is not necessary for us to stay long; it will do you such a deal of harm.'

Lady Beresford sighed.

'When one has grown-up daughters ——,' she said almost to herself.

'Mamma, dear,' said Nan, eagerly, 'would you rather stay at home? Wouldn't you rather stay at home? and I will keep you company ——'

'Don't be silly, child,' said her eldest sister. 'Do you think your dress cost nothing?'

The worst time of all was the waiting in Spring Gardens, where there was a block of carriages. It was all darkness,

and expectation, and the hopeless sense that, being imprisoned in this slowly moving line, there was no escape. But when they were once at the entrance, and when Nan got a glimpse at the hall, her courage revived wonderfully. There was such a crowd of people—coming, going, waiting, looking for friends, and arranging dresses—that she felt that she could slip into this self-interested throng, and be lost from observation altogether. She began to be forgetful of herself. When they were going up the stairs she heard names after names announced that she was quite familiar with—either through the newspapers or through the conversation at luncheon-tables; and she was almost anxious to get quickly up to have a glimpse at these celebrated people. When she got to the landing, she did not see

Lady Stratherne at all; for her eyes were filled with wonder at the blaze of light and colour beyond—the draperies of flags, and masses of chandeliers—and she said, under her breath, 'Oh, mamma, isn't it beautiful!' The next thing she heard was 'Nan, dear, how well you are looking! What beautiful forget-me-nots!' and in a startled way she found that she was shaking hands with Lady Stratherne, whose kind eyes were regarding her with a momentary approval. Instinctively, however, she knew from the way that her hostess's eyes had turned to the next comers—there were far too many loiterers about this landing, and Lady Stratherne had enough to do to prevent a dead block on the stairs—that she need not stay to speak; so she followed her mother and sisters into the large, brilliantly-lit room.

Oh, how glad she was that it was crammed with this dense busily-occupied crowd! She felt quite safe; she felt happy; she was pleased that those few forget-me-nots looked nice. And there was no dancing at all. 'Oh, mamma, tell me who all the people are,' she said. She began to consider herself quite at home in the middle of such a crowd of strangers; she had only to be delighted with the blaze of colour, the brilliant costumes, the scent of flowers, the wonders of diamonds.

Momentarily her great good fortune increased. Friends of Lady Beresford began to come round her; and they made a sort of circle, as it were; and Nan found she could keep herself just a little bit outside of it, seeing everything, herself unseen. Her cup of happiness was full. She had passed the ordeal unscathed. Why, it was nothing!

All the people were engaged with themselves; there was not a sound of music; nothing but a hum of talking, and always that bewildering glow of light and colour, and here and there a figure and face suddenly revealing to her somebody she recognised from photographs and portraits in the illustrated papers. She was becoming quite lost to herself. She could have stood there for ever. She was not thinking of Nan Beresford at all when——

When suddenly there was a long low growl from a violoncello. Her heart sank.

Almost at the same moment she saw another little group — of elderly men, mostly — open out at one corner of the room near her; and the next thing she knew was that Sir George's keen eyes had caught sight of her. He was by her side in a second.

'What,' said he, 'standing all alone? Why, where's Charley? What's Charley about? Lady Beresford, how are you? Ah, Mary? Edith, you are lovelier every day. But where is that rascal Charley? I must find a partner for my sweetheart——'

'Oh, please, Sir George,' said Nan, with her heart beating fast.

But by this time there was a noise of preparatory music, and in the middle of the crowd there was something visible like the formation of a double line. At the same instant young Charley Stratherne came hurriedly along, with an eagle eye for possible partners. Him his father instantly seized.

'Where's Frank King? Go and get Frank King. I want Frank King.'

And behold, Frank King was at his elbow!

'Sir George——?'

'Oh, that's you, Frank King. Ask this young lady if she will dance with you——'

'Come on, Frank,' said the youthful M.C., in his hurried bewilderment of duty. 'You'll just do. Let me introduce you to Miss Anne Beresford. Lieutenant King. They want a couple at the other end.'

So he disappeared in the crowd; and Nan found herself in the possession of this young naval officer, who seemed to take matters very coolly, considering that they were wanted right at the top of the spacious assembly-room. Happily, she heard from the music that it was the Lancers that was about to begin; so she was not entirely dismayed.

'I suppose we shall get through somehow,' said he, surveying the close mass of people with the eye of a strategist. The

clearing of the space in the middle had naturally made the surrounding crowd denser.

'I think it will be difficult,' said she, timidly.

'Well, we can try this end,' said he, about to lead her in that direction.

'Oh!' she said, very earnestly, 'I am sure we shall only embarrass them if we have another set at this end. And—and —I am not anxious to dance the Lancers. I would as soon not,' she said.

Then for the first time it seemed that he turned towards her; and as she happened to be looking up at him to impress on him that she would as soon not dance, she instantaneously lowered her eyes and sought refuge in the little scented programme.

'Perhaps,' said he, after the fifteenth

part of a second, 'perhaps you would give me a dance that you like better.'

Her innocent answer was to hand him her programme, upon which there was as yet not a scrap of writing. So, when that matter was arranged, he said to her,

'Would you like to see this dance, then? It's very pretty, when you are at a little distance. And I know how to get to that recess there; it's raised a few inches, you know; and I think you could see.'

'Oh! I should like that!' she said. How grateful she was to him!

They made their way to this side recess, which had been built out, temporarily, from the drawing-room, for the sake of additional space. It was decorated with trailing-plants, trained on trellis-work; and two or three circles of red candles, amid

so much green foliage, had a pretty effect. There were a few people standing about and looking on at the dancing, or talking; it was possible to talk, for here the music was softened.

Nan's companion led her to a raised bench, from which she could see very well; but even as she sat down, and while she was so glad to have been relieved from dancing out there amid all those people, she was touched by some strange misgivings. It was her duty to have danced. She had been presented with a partner; and if only she had not shown herself reluctant, she knew very well he could have found places for them. Were not officers always fond of dancing? And then it suddenly occurred to her that she ought to try to make him some amends. She ought to entertain him with brilliant

conversation, as it were. Meanwhile, what was he doing? Not thinking of her—except as a booby, a child who could not talk. No doubt he was looking out at all those beautiful women there, and wishing he was not imprisoned in this corner.

Nan timidly raised her eyes, and instantly dropped them again. He had been for the moment looking at the forget-me-nots in her hair.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE SAME.

NAN was growing desperate. Speak she must, if only to let him know that she was sensible of his kindness in affording her this blissful relief; for she believed it was entirely on her account that he had proposed to sit out the dance. So she said, wildly,

'You go to a great many balls, I suppose?'

'Oh, dear no,' he said. 'I am not much ashore.'

Of course. She might have known.

Was there not an air of command about him, young as he was? No doubt he held far too important a position to waste time on idle entertainments.

'I mean earlier—as a midshipman,' she stammered. 'You must have been to many places, and—and—I thought the life of a midshipman was nothing but parties and balls, along with a great deal of mischief. That is what one reads, you know, about the young gentlemen—always tumbling into trouble, and always getting happily out of it, and always amusing themselves just as much as they amuse others.'

This was not so bad. Nan's face had brightened; she regarded him with her clear eyes.

'You are thinking of Captain Marryat,' said he, laughing. 'But times have changed sadly for the middy since then. It isn't all

beer and skittles now. Nowadays, the poor chap can scarcely call his soul his own; and if he is going in for his Three Ones——'

'I beg your pardon; what is that?' she said, with a grave interest.

'Trifling little things,' said he, jocosely. 'Only first-class certificates in gunnery, seamanship, and mathematics; then, to finish up with, the unhappy youth has to look forward to an interview or two with the hydrographer, who isn't at all a gentleman to be made a fool of.'

How was it that she knew instinctively that this young officer had got his Three Ones—nay, that he had carried them off easily, triumphantly? What was there in his manner, or the shape of his forehead, or his expression, that rendered her perfectly certain that he had nothing to

fear from all the hydrographers ever born?

'Why, even in my time, I can remember when the middy was allowed a good deal more law,' he continued; and now he had sat down beside her, and her eyes met his quite frankly. 'I remember a fearful scene at Cherbourg, at a ball there; that was when the fleet went over, and there was a great round of festivities. Well, this ball, I think, was given by the Mayor—I am not quite sure; but, at all events, the midshipmites were invited with the rest, and those who could get leave went of course. Well, we had the run of the refreshment-room, and we used it. There was far too much champagne, and all our seniors were in the ball-room,—the Duke of Somerset, and the whole of them,—so we set to work to chaff the waiters in unknown tongues.

Anything more patient or friendly than the conduct of these amiable creatures I never saw. They entirely entered into the spirit of the thing, and grinned and nodded in high glee when we inquired about their mothers and sisters—in English, of course; and then we tried bad French on them, and Welsh, with a touch of Lancashire thrown in; and then they grinned all the more, and shrugged their shoulders. My chum Greville was the worst, I think; he kept asking for all sorts of ridiculous things, and was very angry when he couldn't get them. "*Avez-vous du vin de Cockalorum?*" he asked of one fellow: of course Greville spoke real true-blue English-French. "*Coque-a-lorrrrme?*" said the waiter. "*Je crois que non, Monsieur* ——." "*Pourquoi n'avez vous pas du vin de Cockalorum?*" said Greville, with

great indignation. "*C'est une chose monstrueuse. Nous sommes les invités de la grande nation Francaise; nous sommes les officiers de sa Majesté la Reine d'Angleterre; et vous n'avez pas du vin de Cockalorum!*" There was enough of other wine, at all events,' added Frank King. 'I am afraid there was a good deal of headache next morning among the younger officers of her Majesty's fleet.'

'Weren't you afraid,' said Nan, who had forgotten what shyness was by this time; 'weren't you afraid the French might be tempted to take a mean advantage and capture the fleet bodily?'

'It would have been no more mean advantage,' said he, with a laugh, 'than we used to take in fighting them when they were sea-sick.'

'Sailors sea-sick?' she exclaimed.

'Yes, that's just where it was,' he said, and the friendly interest he displayed in this young lady was very wonderful. Already they seemed to have known each other for a quite indefinite time. 'Mind you, people laugh nowadays at the old belief that one English sailor was as good as seven French ones. But it was quite true; and the explanation is simple enough. The fact was that the English kept such a strict blockade of the French ports that the French sailors never had a proper chance of finding their sea legs. They never got out. When they did come out they had to fight; and how can you expect a sea-sick man to fight? But I was talking of that chum of mine, Greville. He was the coolest hand I ever came across. Once he and I—when we were mids, you know—had to go down by rail from Genoa to Spezia——'

At this moment the music slowly ceased; and the kaleidoscopic groups out there, that had been going through all sorts of interminglings and combinations, lost cohesion, as it were, and melted away into the murmuring and amorphous crowd. Miss Nan knew very well that she ought now to return to her mamma; but how was she to break in upon this story? When one has already begun to tell you something, more particularly when that something is about himself and an old companion—and especially if you do not wish to be perplexed with invitations to dance—it is not polite to interrupt.

So the young lieutenant, taking no notice whatever of the cessation of the dancing, continued his story, and told several more, which Miss Nan found intensely interesting—so absorbing, indeed, that she met the

eyes of her companion without any abashment, and frequently laughed in her low, quiet way. These two seemed very friendly, and heedless of what was going on around them; and might, in fact, have continued talking for a quite indefinite time had not, all of a sudden, Charley Stratherne come up, followed by a tall man with a long yellow beard; and before Nan knew what had happened, she was being led away to pierce the great throng that had now grown very dense indeed, a waltz having already begun. As for the young lieutenant, he somewhat abruptly declined his friend's offer to find him a partner.

'You have plenty of dancing men; there won't be room to move shortly.'

Charley Stratherne was too busy to stay and ask why his friend refused to dance, and would not even remain in the ball-

room; the next second he was off. Then the young lieutenant managed to make his way through the crowd to the door; and as there were still plenty of people arriving, he succeeded in passing his hostess unobserved and making his way downstairs.

He entered the brilliantly-decorated but quite empty supper room, and sat down. One of the servants happened to come in and stared at him.

'Look here,' said he, 'could you get me an evening paper?'

'Oh yes, sir,' said the man: and he went off and speedily returned with the newspaper.

Frank King sat down, turned his back to the table, and was soon all by himself in this long chamber, apparently deeply absorbed in the evening's news. What he really was doing, however, was listening to the music overhead.

Meanwhile, Nan got through the waltz somehow. The crush was so great that her partner, who was not much of a pilot, generally succeeded in steering her into some little side bay, where they came slowly to rest by mere friction, or else landed her right in the middle of the room, where there was a throng of unskilful dancers become stationary in spite of themselves. At last she was surrendered again to her mother's care.

'Well, Nan,' said Lady Beresford, with an amused look, 'how did you get on?'

'You mean how much did I get off?' said she. 'I believe I'm all in rags. And that elephant of a man bumped me against every person in the room.'

Here the Admiral came along—bustling as was his wont, talking to everybody at the same time, and invariably putting his

hand on the shoulder of those whom he knew best, to give effect to his speech.

'Well, well, my girl,' he said, 'how did you like your partner? Did he amuse you? Did he compliment you on the roses in your cheeks—ah, that's the Brighton air, that is.'

'Oh, if you mean Lieutenant King,' said Nan, without any hesitation or embarrassment, 'I think he is very amusing indeed—very. And very clever, too, is he not?'

'Oh, yes, he's a smart young fellow—a smart young fellow is Frank King. We've had an eye on him for some time back.'

'I should say now,' remarked Nan, with a wise air, 'that he had got his Three Ones?'

The Admiral stared at her, and then burst out laughing.

'You young impertinence! What do

you know about the Three Ones? He had got his certificates before he was one-and-twenty. But here, I will tell you something.'

He took her a step aside.

'Hush, now—hush-sh. It is a State secret. Don't say a word. But I'll tell you what we're going to do with Frank King to-morrow; we're going to give him the command of the *Fly-by-Night*. What do you think of that for a lieutenant of five-and-twenty?'

'If he has relatives, I suppose they will be very proud,' said Nan.

'Relatives? Don't you know the Kings of Kingscourt? But there now, I mustn't keep you talking; I suppose you're engaged for every dance. Mind you are down at supper while I'm there; I will drink a glass of wine to the roses in your cheeks——'

And so he was off again before she could say, as she greatly wished to say—'Oh, Sir George, I would rather talk to you than have to do any more dancing. Surely there are enough people dancing.'

Then she looked round the room for some considerable time. At last she said to herself, contentedly,

'Yes, I thought he was too clever looking to care about dancing, and I don't wonder he has gone home. But it would have been nice if I had had the chance to tell him he was going to have the command of the *Fly-by-Night*.'

## CHAPTER V.

### THE SAME.

The night passed quickly, and amid all this bewilderment of music and dancing and introductions, Nan very soon forgot even the existence of the young Lieutenant whose acquaintance she had made. Moreover, the succession of these rapid excitements left no room for anything resembling stage-fright—although, it is true, each time the band began anew she felt a little throb. But Lady Stratherne, who had now all her guests assembled, was so indefatigable in seeing that Nan should not be left neglected, and the dancing in this crowd was

so much a matter of experiment and accident, and the fact that she was introduced to one or two partners who seemed no more expert than herself, was so reassuring, that on the whole Nan was very much delighted in her demure way, and that delight showed itself in her face and in her clear, bright eyes. Her hair was a little wild, and she had lost some of her forget-me-nots, and there were one or two flying tags that had got dissociated from the skirt of her dress; but was not that all part of the play? Nan's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were pleased and bright; the only thing that troubled her in this whirl of excitement was an occasional qualm about her mother. Had she not promised to keep the poor mamma company? But a time would come, and then she would make amends by being particularly affectionate.

The time did come. On consulting the programme Nan found opposite the next dance a scrawl that might be made out to be 'F. H. King;' and then she bethought herself of the young sailor. Well, he had left. That was very opportune. She would devote the time of this dance to her mother, and take her into the tea-room, and ask which of her old friends she had met, and even offer to go home with her if she felt fatigued.

'Mamma,' she said to Lady Beresford, 'don't you think I've done enough? England can't expect you to do more than your duty, even with all those flags overhead. Come away, and I will get you some tea, though what would be better for you still would be some B. and S.'

'Nan, how dare you!' said her mother, angrily, and glancing round at the same

time. 'You may use such expressions, if you like, when you are with your brother. Pray don't disgrace the whole family when you are elsewhere.'

'Mamma, dear,' said Nan, contritely, 'it is madness, pure madness. The excitement of my first ball has got into my brain——'

'Into your what?' said her mother, with a smile. Nan, and Nan alone, could pacify her in a second.

At the same moment the band began again; and somehow Nan, looking up, found before her some one who was no other than the young Lieutenant she had met at the beginning of the evening. She was somewhat bewildered by this Jack-in-the-box sort of appearance.

'I think you promised me this next dance, Miss Beresford,' said he. He was a grave-looking young man for his years—

a Corsican Brother—the Ghost in *Hamlet.* She did not know what to make of him.

'I thought you had left,' she stammered. 'You have not been dancing?'

'No, I have not been dancing,' he repeated.

'I will come back to you soon, mamma,' she said, and she put her hand on his arm, and moved away with him.

'The fact is,' said he, 'I don't like much being introduced to strangers. Most girls stare at you so, with a sort of hold-off air, and it is so difficult to get on pleasant and friendly terms with them.'

'I should not have thought you were so shy,' said Nan, with an honest laugh.

He flushed a little, and said—

'If you've lived most of your life on board ship, you may feel a little bit awkward; but mind,' he added with some

eagerness, 'sometimes, not often (once in half a dozen years, maybe) you meet with a girl who is quite different from the others, quite different. You know it at once from her manner, and you can make friends with her with the greatest ease, simply because she is intelligent and quick in appreciation, and not affected in her ways, or stiff.'

This eager encomium passed upon an imaginary person struck Nan as being somewhat out of place; for the waltz had already begun, and she wanted to get back to her mamma: whereas this Lieutenant King seemed to wish to stand there and talk to her.

'Of course, that's special good luck for a sailor,' said he with a smile, 'to be able to make friends in a short time; for it's only a short time he has. Ashore to-day, and off to-morrow again; and what's worse, out of sight out of mind.'

'Oh, not always,' said Nan, cheerfully.

'Oh yes, it is,' he said; 'people on shore are too much concerned among themselves to think about the people away at sea. Why, you yourself now; after you leave this house to-night you will completely forget that there are such things as either ships or sailors until you come back here to another ball, and then the bunting will remind you.'

'Now there you are quite wrong,' said she firmly, 'for I see ships and sailors every day of my life.'

'Why, how is that?' he exclaimed with great interest.

'We live in Brighton,' said Nan simply, 'and I walk a good deal along the downs towards Newhaven, you know. The ships are a good way off, generally; still, you watch them, and you are interested in them.'

'You walk along the downs between

Brighton and Newhaven?' he said, as if that was an extraordinary matter. 'Alone?'

'Usually.'

'When I am passing I will look out for you; I will imagine that I can see you.'

Nan thought this was idle talk, so she said with a smile,

'Shall we give up this dance too? The fact is, I want to take mamma and get her some tea, or an ice, or something.'

'Oh, don't do that!' said he, eagerly; 'introduce me to her, and I will take you both down to supper. There are some people there already——'

'But I must not go down—not yet,' said Nan, remembering her youth.

'Why not?' said he boldly. 'I know Lady Stratherne well enough for anything. Why, nothing could be more natural. Of course you will come down with your mamma.'

'I'm very hungry, and that's the truth,' said Nan; 'for I was too excited or frightened to think about dinner. But if I went down now, wouldn't they think it was a little bit——'

She was about to say 'cheeky,' but she remembered in time that this was not her brother. He broke in abruptly—

'Never mind what any one thinks; come away, Miss Beresford, and introduce me to your mamma.'

Then he looked at the various couples rapidly moving round that open space to the sound of the seductive music, and he said, rather wistfully—

'Don't you think we might have one turn? I shall not dance again this evening.'

'Oh yes, certainly, if you wish it,' she said, quite blithely; and she gave him her fan to hold, and arranged her train, and a

couple of seconds thereafter they were lost in that slowly circling whirlpool of muslin and silk and satin.

When they came out of it again he was introduced to Lady Beresford, and although he was quite anxiously humble and courteous to the elder lady, he would hear of nothing but that she and Nan should forthwith go downstairs to supper. By and by there would be too great a crush. It was a kindness to Lady Stratherne to go before everybody else wanted a place. And Miss Anne was hungry, which was a great matter.

Lady Beresford looked at Nan, but that young lady was unconscious. The end of it was that these three very speedily found themselves below, in the supper room, where as yet there were only a number of elderly people who had grown tired of the duties of chaperoning. And they had scarcely

sat down when Frank King, who was most assiduous in his attentions to Lady Beresford, and scarcely saw Nan at all, discovered that the mamma knew certain relatives of his, and knew all about his own family, and had even on one occasion visited Kingscourt a good many years ago. Lady Beresford was very kind to him. He was a pleasant-mannered, clever-looking young man, and he had a distinguished air that lent value to the little courtesies he paid. She even said, as they were talking of chance meetings and the like, that she would be glad if he called on them while she and her daughters were in London.

'May I be allowed to call on you at Brighton, some day, Lady Beresford?' he said quickly. 'The fact is, my leave is out; I have to rejoin my ship at Portsmouth to-morrow.'

At this Nan pricked up her ears. She suddenly remembered that to her had been entrusted the covert intelligence of his promotion. But was it necessary it should be kept so great a secret, she asked herself, rather breathlessly, and with her heart beginning to beat quickly? If he were to know on the morrow, why not now? It would make him very happy; it would indeed add a few hours of happiness to his life; and surely Sir George Stratherne, who was the very soul of kindness, would rather approve?

Well, she let these two talk on for a time; she wished to be discreet; she wished to be less nervous. For was it not a great event in the career of a young man? And how might he take it? She said to herself, 'The old monarchs used to kill the messengers who brought them bad news,

and they used to give heaps of presents to those who brought them good news. I am glad I shall be able to tell him of his promotion, for he has been so excessively kind to mamma.'

She waited her opportunity.

'Oh, Lieutenant King, do you know a ship called the *Fly-by-Night?*' she said, quite casually, and in an off-hand way.

'Yes,' he said, regarding her with some surprise. 'She's what they call a school-brig—a training-brig. I think she's at Plymouth.'

'A training-brig?' said Nan, innocently. 'Then they want a clever officer, I suppose, to be in command of a training-brig.'

'Yes, they want a smart fellow,' said he, without any great interest; and he was about to turn to Lady Beresford again when Nan continued—

'Would it—would it surprise you if you heard you were to be transferred to the *Fly-by-Night?*'

'I shouldn't like to hear of it,' said he, laughing; 'I am satisfied where I am.'

'But I mean to command her.'

'I'm afraid that's a long way off yet,' said he, lightly.

'Oh no, it isn't,' said Nan timorously. 'I am sure it is no great secret—you will know to-morrow—you are to be appointed to-morrow to the command of the *Fly-by-Night.*'

His face flushed a deep red.

'You are joking, Miss Beresford.'

'Oh no, I am not,' said Nan, hastily. 'Sir George told me to-night; I am not joking at all——Captain King,' said she, at a wild venture.

For an instant she saw his under lip

quiver. He sat quite silent. Then he said—

'That is Sir George's doing—if it is possible.'

He had scarcely uttered the words when the Admiral himself appeared, bringing in a little old lady with a portentous head-dress. Nan instantly conjectured that she must be a dowager-duchess, for she thought that no one but a dowager-duchess would dare to wear such a thing.

Sir George paused as he passed them.

'Hillo, here's my sweetheart. I told you I wanted to drink a glass of wine with you. Doing your duty, Frank King? When's your leave out?'

'I am going down to Portsmouth to-morrow, Sir George.'

'No, no; you'll have a message from the Admiralty to-morrow. I didn't see

you dancing to-night; you young fellows are getting lazy.'

He passed on. Nan looked triumphantly across the corner of the table. Frank King said—laughing off his embarrassment—

'I have a vague impression that I ought to thank you for it, Miss Beresford; and I don't know how. I hope it is true. They never gave me a hint of it. You would have thought Charley Stratherne would have known.'

'It was very imprudent of my daughter,' said Lady Beresford, severely, 'to mention such a thing; but Sir George makes a pet of her, and I hope no harm has been done.'

Frank King warmly protested. How could any harm be done? And he redoubled his attentions to Lady Beresford. Not only that, but when they returned to the ball-room he was very anxious to be

introduced to Nan's sisters, and was most polite to them, though he did not ask them for a dance. Moreover, he got hold of Charley Stratherne, and through him made the acquaintance of Mr. Tom Beresford; and these three, having adjourned for a time to a certain remote snuggery where were sherry and soda and cigarettes, Frank King was quite content to accept from Mr. Tom hints concerning things about town. There was in especial a famous 'lion comique'—the Great Dunse, or the Jolly Ass, or some such creature—about whom Mr. Tom was much exercised; and Frank King professed himself quite interested in hearing about this person. The grave young Lieutenant was indeed extraordinarily complaisant this evening. He was unusually talkative—when he was not a most attentive listener. You would

have thought that he had acquired a sudden admiration for the brilliant social qualities of Mr. Tom, and that he had never heard such good stories before.

Well, the Beresfords left about three; and that was the end of Nan's first ball. On the whole she had every reason to be pleased. She had acquitted herself fairly well; she had gratified the soft-hearted old Admiral; she hadn't fallen in love with anybody; and she had seen a number of celebrated persons in whom she was interested. She thought she had done a kindness, too, in telling Lieutenant King beforehand of his appointment.

She was surprised, however, and a little bit annoyed when, on the afternoon of the next day but one, her brother Tom brought in this same Frank King to five o'clock tea. He said, with something of a blush,

that he wished to tell her that her news had been true; he had heard from the Admiralty that morning, and he wished to thank her. Nan was somewhat cold in her manner; she had thought with some pride that he was not like the other gentlemen who came about the house in the afternoon. She had seen enough of them and their idleness, and aimless flirtations, and languid airs. She had taken Frank King to be of firmer stuff, and not likely to waste his time at afternoon teas.

He was kind and polite enough, no doubt, and he distributed his attentions in the most impartial manner—even including two young lady visitors to whom he was introduced; but Nan seized an early opportunity of slipping away to her own room, where she resumed certain very serious studies that occupied her mind at this

time. When she came downstairs again Lieutenant King was gone.

On the following day her holiday ended, and she went down to Brighton. Many a time she thought of the ball, and always with a pleasurable recollection. When, however, she happened to think of Frank King—and it was seldom—it was always with a slight touch of disappointment. No doubt his leave was extended; probably he was still in town, and repeating those afternoon calls in Bruton Street. As for Nan, she honestly did not care to which train of admirers he might attach himself—whether he was to be Mary's captive or Edith's slave. But she was disappointed.

'I did think he was a little bit different from the others,' she would say to herself; and then she would turn to Mr. Lockyer's last discoveries in spectrum analysis.

## CHAPTER VI.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

'NAN, do you see that ship out there?' said Mary Beresford.

'I saw it as I came along, said Nan. This was the afternoon on which she had fallen in with Singing Sal. Nan was rather tired after her long walk, and was not inclined to show much interest in that now lessening vessel, which was slowly sinking into the dusk of the west.

'Do you know what her name is?' said Mary Beresford, still regarding her younger sister.

'No,' said Nan. 'I heard people say she was a man-of-war.'

'That is the *Fly-by-Night*.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Nan, with no greater interest than before.

'And Lieutenant King has just called here,' the elder sister said, pointedly.

'Oh, indeed,' said Nan. 'I wish I had been in; I should like to have seen him in uniform.'

That was all she said, and all she thought; for now there were far more serious things than ball-rooms and young lieutenants occupying Nan's attention. She and her sisters were going abroad—she for the first time; and she was busy with foreign languages, and lives of the great painters, and catalogues, and guide-books, and dressing-cases. The world she hoped to plunge into on the following week was,

in her imagination, composed of nothing but cathedrals and picture-galleries; and she could have wished that the picture-galleries might contain nothing but the labours of Botticelli and Andrea del Sarto. The clear ethereal beauty and tenderness of the one, the solemn thoughtfulness of the other: these were things that filled her mind with a mysterious gladness, as if something had been added to her own life. Rubens she cordially hated. Of Titian she had as yet seen hardly anything.

At last the wonderful day of setting out arrived, and Mr. Tom graciously consented to accompany his sisters as far as Newhaven. It was towards the afternoon that they started, in an open carriage, the maid on the box beside the coachman. Tom was making facetious remarks about south-west gales, and his two elder sisters were

angrily remonstrating with him. Nan was silent. She had not a thought for the ships and sailors out there, or for any pensive young officer bitterly saying to himself that out of sight was out of mind; and she had forgotten for a moment all about Singing Sal and her free-and-easy ways. Nan's mind was at this time filled with Dante, and Florence, and the young Raphael, and the Doge wedding the Adriatic, and Pompeii, and Savonarola, and goodness knows what else. When they reached Newhaven —when they forced her to descend from the carriage—her eyes had a bewildered look. She had not seen Newhaven at all. She had been watching the execution of Savonarola—she standing in the middle of the great crowd in a square in Florence.

They stayed the night at the hotel at Newhaven. Next morning falsified all

Mr. Tom's malicious forecasts; the weather was fine, and they had a smooth passage across. In due time they reached Paris.

To Nan, Paris meant picture-galleries. The streets were new-looking, non-historical, filled with common-place people; but in the picture-galleries she was with great names, in great times.

'Nan,' her sisters remonstrated, 'what *is* the use of dawdling over pictures like this? The Old Masters are all alike. There are plenty of Holy Families and broken-necked angels in England. Why don't you put off all this till you get back to the National Gallery?'

Fortunately, Nan was the most biddable of companions. She seemed to be in dreamland. You could do what you liked with her if only you allowed her to gaze with her great eyes, and think, and be silent.

Now it is unnecessary to follow in detail the various journeyings and adventures of these three young ladies and their maid; we may pass on to a certain evening when they found themselves in Lucerne. It was an exceedingly hot evening; and after dinner the crowd in this great hotel had been glad to pour out into the spacious verandah, which was formed by a succession of arches all hanging with evergreens. There they formed little groups round the small tables, lit up by the orange glow streaming out from the windows of the hotel, some taking coffee, some smoking, all chatting idly.

'It feels like thunder,' said Mary Beresford to her sister Edith. 'It would be odd if we were to have a real thunderstorm just after listening to the imitation one in the Cathedral.'

'The *vox humana* stop is better at some

things than at others,' said Miss Edith, critically. 'In the chanting the boys' voices are good, and the tenor voices are good; but the bass is too musical. You hear that it is the organ. And it vibrates too much.'

'They must make a good deal of money by it,' said the elder sister, 'in the tourist season. I am sure there were a hundred people there.'

'I wish I knew the name of the piece. I should like to try one or two of the airs.'

'It was considerate of them to finish up in time to let us get back for the *table d'hôte*.'

'Sooner or later that organ will shake the Cathedral to bits: the vibrations were fearful. I thought there was a great deal too much noise. You lose effect when you pile up the agony like that: people only

want to stop their ears to prevent their heads being split.'

So they chatted on. But what was it that Nan, who had accompanied them, had heard as she sat in the great, empty, dimly-lit Cathedral, with her hands clasped, her head bent forward on them, her eyes closed? Or, rather, what was it that she saw?—for this seemed to be a picture in music. She saw a small chapel far away up in the mountains, the trembling red rays in the windows looking strange above the snow. She heard the monks at their midnight chanting—low, and sad, and distant. And then it seemed, as she listened, as if the stars overhead were being blurred out, and a murmuring wind came down the gorge, and the air grew cold. The darkness deepened; the wind rose and moaned through the pine forests; then an angry

gust swept along, so that the intoning of the monks was lost altogether. There was a rumble of distant thunder—overhead, among the unseen peaks. But still, unconscious of the threatening storm, those within the small building went on with their holy office, and there were snatches of the clear singing of boys—so faint that you could scarcely hear; and again the strong, sad, sombre voices of the men. Then the tempest broke, fierce and terrible: the elements seemed mingled together. She lost sight of the chapel in the whirling snow; the heavens rattled overhead; and the wind swept down so that the whole earth trembled. A horror of wrath and darkness has overwhelmed the world; and what of the patient choristers now? No longer are their voices heard amid the appalling fury of the hurricane; the sudden

lightning-flash reveals nothing in the blackness; the powers of evil have overcome; and the universe has lost its hope. But now there comes a lull; and suddenly—far away, and faint, and triumphant—rises the song of reliance and joy. The demons of the night mutter and moan; but the divine song rises clearer and more clear. It is the voice of faith, silver-toned and sweet; and the very heavens themselves seem to listen; and the thunders rumble away into the valleys; and the stars, shining, and calm, and benignant, come out again over the mountain-peaks. And lo! once more she can descry the faint red rays above the snow; and she can almost see the choristers within the little building; and she listens to the silver-clear song; and her heart is filled with a strange new gladness and trust. What must she do to keep it

there for ever? By what signal self-sacrifice—by what devotion of a whole life-time—by what patient and continuous duty—shall she secure to herself this divine peace, so that the storms and terrors and trials of the world may sweep by it powerless and unregarded?

When she rose and blindly followed her sisters, she was all trembling, and there was a great lump in her throat. She was, indeed, in that half-hysterical state in which rash resolves are sometimes made that may determine the course of a human life. But Nan had the sense to know that she was in this state; and she had enough firmness of character to enable her to reason with herself. She walked, silent, with her sisters from the Cathedral to the hotel; and she was reasoning with herself all the time. She was saying to herself that she had had

a glimpse, an impression of something divinely beautiful and touching, that at some time or other might influence or even determine her course of life. When that time came she could remember. But not now—*not now.* She was not going to resolve to become a Catholic, or join a sisterhood, or give herself up to the service of the poor, merely because this wonderful music had filled her heart with emotion. It was necessary that she should think of something hard and practical—something that would be the embodiment of common sense. She would force herself to think of that. And, casting about, she determined to think—about Singing Sal!

It was rather hard upon Sal, who had a touch of vanity, and was quite conscious of what she deemed the romantic side of her way of life, that she should be taken as the

sort of incarnation of the prosaic. Nevertheless, all through that *table d'hôte* dinner, Nan kept to her self-imposed task, and was busying herself about the wages of the coastguardsmen, and the probable cost of mackerel, and the chances of Sal's having to face a westerly squall of wind and rain when she was breasting the steep hill rising from Newhaven. Was Sal singing that night before the Old Ship? Or was she in the little *cul-de-sac* near the Town-hall where the public-house was that the fishermen called in at on their way home? Nan was apparently dining at the *table d'hôte* of a hotel in Lucerne; but in reality she spent that evening in Brighton.

And she was still thinking of Brighton when, as has been related, there was a migration from the dining-saloon to the verandah outside; so that she did

not hear much of what her sisters were saying.

'We are certainly going to have a real thunderstorm after the imitation one,' Miss Beresford repeated. 'Do you hear that?'

There was a low rumble of thunder; likewise some pattering of rain-drops on the leaves outside.

'It won't be half as fine though,' said the musical sister.

There was a sudden white flash of light that revealed in a surprising manner the sharp outline of Pilatus; then darkness and a crashing peal of thunder. The rain began to pour; and some passers by took shelter under the densely-foliaged trees fronting the gravelled terrace of the hotel. The light that came through the tall windows fell on those dark figures; but dimly.

Nan had been thinking so much of Brighton, and Sal, and the downs, and ships and sailors, that when this orange glow fell on a gentleman whom she thought she recognised as Lieutenant Frank King she was scarcely astonished. She looked hard through the dusk; yes, surely it was he.

'Mary,' she said, but without any great interest, 'isn't that Lieutenant King standing by that farthest tree?'

The eldest sister also peered through the obscurity.

'Well, yes, it is. What an extraordinary thing! Oh, I remember, he said he was going abroad. But what a curious coincidence! Why don't you go and speak to him, Nan?'

'Why should I go and speak to him?' said Nan. 'I should only get wet.'

'What can have brought him here?' said Edith.

'Not his ship, at all events,' said Mary Beresford, smartly. 'It's only Shakspeare who can create seaports inland.'

'You ought to know better than that,' said Nan with some asperity, for she was very valiant in protecting her intellectual heroes against the attacks of a flippant criticism. 'You ought to know that at one time the Kingdom of Bohemia had seaports on the Adriatic: every school-girl knows that nowadays.'

'They didn't when I was at school,' said Mary Beresford. 'But aren't you going to speak to Lieutenant King, Nan?'

'Oh, he won't want to be bothered with a lot of girls,' said Nan; and she refused to stir.

A few seconds thereafter, though there

was still an occasional flash of lightning, the rain slackened somewhat; and the young Lieutenant—who was clad in a travelling-suit of gray, by-the-way, and looked remarkably like the other young Englishmen loitering about the front of the hotel—emerged from his shelter, shook the rain-drops from his sleeves, and passed on into the dark.

The very next morning the Beresfords left Lucerne for Zurich. They stayed there three days—Nan busy all the time in teaching herself how to propel a boat with two oars, her face to the bow; and she liked to practise most in moonlight. Then they left Zurich one afternoon, and made their way southward into the mountainous region adjacent to the sombre Wallensee. The stormy sunset deepened and died out; rain, rain, rain pursued them all the way to

Chur. They got to their hotel there in an omnibus that jolted through the mud and the darkness.

But next morning, when Nan Beresford went to the window of the little sitting-room and looked abroad, she uttered a cry of surprise that was also meant as a call to wake her sleeping sisters. She stepped out on to a wooden balcony, and found herself poised high above the flooded river that was roaring down its channel, while in front of her was the most vivid and brilliant of pictures, the background formed by a vast semicircle of hills. She had it all to herself on this lovely morning—the fresh air and sunlight; the plunging river below; the terraced gardens on the opposite bank; over that again, the tumbled-about collection of gleaming white houses, and green casements, and red roofs, and old

towers and belfries; and then, higher still, and enclosing, as it were, the picturesque little town, the great ethereal amphitheatre of pale blue mountains, with here and there a sprinkling of snow glittering sharply, as if it were quite close at hand. How fresh and cold the morning air was, after the sultry atmosphere of the lakes! How beautiful the snow was! Nan did not like to be alone. She wished to share her delight with some one. 'Edith! Edith!' she called. There was no answer.

Suddenly she found she was no longer the solitary possessor of this brilliant little picture. Happening to turn her head somewhat, she perceived some one coming across the bridge; and, after a minute's surprise and doubt and astonishment, she convinced herself that the stranger was no other than Frank King. The discovery

startled her. This time it could be no mere coincidence. Surely he was following them? Could it be possible that he had come with bad news from Brighton?

She did not stay to waken her sisters. She hastily put on her hat and went downstairs; and the first person she saw was Lieutenant King himself, who was calmly looking over the list of arrivals.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AUF DER REISE.

The frank, clear, dark-blue eyes of this young Lieutenant were expressive enough; they said a good deal more than he did, when he happened to turn and catch sight of her. He, indeed, was surprised and embarrassed; it was only his eyes that dared to say, 'Oh, how glad I am to have found you!'

'You have no bad news?' she said, quickly. 'There is no one ill at Brighton?'

'Oh, no,' he said, wondering.

Relieved from her sudden fear, she

paused, as it were to take breath. Her first thought was that her hair was far from being properly dressed. Her next that it was annoying to find the commanding officer of one of her Majesty's vessels lounging about the Continent like an ordinary tourist. But even in this costume she had to admit to herself that he looked handsome, and clever, and distinguished; moreover, he was so clearly glad to see her, that she must needs be civil.

'I saw you at Lucerne—for a moment,' she said. 'And when I saw you again just now from the window, I thought you might have a message for us.'

'Oh, no,' he said. 'But I—I—half expected to meet you somewhere. Your sister said you were going over the Splügen Pass.

'But what have you done with your ship?' she asked, still regarding that tourist costume with disapproval.

'I am my own master now,' he said; 'I can take my leave any time of the year I like; and, of course, just now all one's friends are on the Continent, and—and—a sailor has so few chances of making friends that he doesn't like to lose them——'

'Then you are with a party?' she said, in her downright way.

'No,' said he, rather confusedly. 'I—I am alone, as it happens. I thought I should like to have a short time in Italy ——You see, I have never been over one of the passes; and they say the Splügen is very fine.'

'Oh, you are going over the Splügen?' she said, with wide eyes.

'Yes,' he said, unblushingly. 'I sup-

pose you and your sisters will be starting from here to-morrow or next day?'

'We start this morning at half-past ten,' said Nan.

'How very odd!' he exclaimed. 'I have got the chance of a return carriage that also leaves this morning.'

'I thought gentlemen walked,' said Nan, severely, 'when they wished to see mountain scenery.'

'When they have time I suppose they do,' he answered. 'But I have only a few days. I must get back to my ship.'

'I can't understand yet how you have left her,' said Nan. 'I thought you would take such a pride in your own ship. And what need have you of miscellaneous friends when you have your brother officers?'

'Ward-room talk is apt to become monotonous. Besides, the *Fly-by-Night*

is in dock just now; and I needn't get back until the repairs are done.

'Well,' said Nan, who hoped she had not been rude, 'the Splügen Pass doesn't belong to me, and I have no right to object to your crossing.'

'Well, that is very kind of you,' said he, laughing; and then he said more seriously, 'but don't think I am likely to take any offence, Miss Beresford. I see quite clearly what you mean; and it is very kind of you to take any interest in the—in the ship. And I wish you would let me send you a photograph of her; they say it is very well done: it is so difficult, don't you know——'

It seemed to Nan that this young man was going to stand there talking to her for ever; and she knew that his eyes, which were extremely keen and observant,

were regarding her dishevelled hair. At the best of times, order and smoothness had never been the strong points of what a Brighton youth had on one occasion irreverently termed her wig. She remembered that boy and his insolent phrase at this very moment. 'Hallo, ginger! where did you buy your wig?' he had called out. She wished she had taken a minute to consider before rushing downstairs.

'Will you come and see my sisters after breakfast?' she said, with a wild effort to get away.

But no; he continued to talk in a gentle, familiar, submissive way, as if he had known her a very long time, and yet did not like to presume on the intimacy. And he talked about a good many things (it was as yet not eight o'clock, and there was scarcely any one about), though he

generally came round to suggesting that there were certain favoured people in the world whose fineness of character was easily apparent. And he said that you ought not to lose the chance of securing the friendship of such rare mortals: it would be one of the joys of life. To be thought well of by people such as they, whose approval was worth something; to be remembered in absence; to know there were some people not fickle, trivial, or insincere. . . . In short, he talked about everything and nothing, apparently for the sole purpose of detaining her, and Nan knew that all the time he was looking at those wisps and rings of unbridled hair.

'Good-bye for the present,' she said, holding out her hand.

He held her hand for a second—inadvertently, it seemed.

'I shall come round about half-past nine to see your sisters. It was excessively kind of you to come down; I might have missed you again as I missed you at Lucerne.'

'Oh, well,' she said, in the most matter-of-fact way, 'I thought it might be more than an accident. Good-bye!'

Nan found that her sisters had got up and were nearly ready to come downstairs, so that she must have been kept talking there for a considerable time. At breakfast she remarked casually that Lieutenant King was in Chur, and that he was also thinking of setting out for Splügen that morning. Edith the Beauty opened her brown eyes very wide; Mary, the elder sister, began to ask a few questions. Presently the latter laughed in her cold way.

'It is rather audacious,' she said. 'What are we to do with him?'

'We have nothing whatever to do with him,' said Nan, somewhat hotly.

'It will be very nice,' said Edith, 'if there is a *table d'hôte* in the evening. And if we were to get into trouble with the driver, it would be useful to have a man near to use bad language.'

'Well, we shan't see much of him on the way,' remarked Miss Beresford. 'We have four horses; of course he will only have two.'

'I don't know,' said Edith. 'You may be sure he doesn't live on his lieutenant's pay. Mamma says the Kings of Kingscourt are very rich.'

'They say the elder brother has gone fearfully to the bad,' said Miss Beresford, in a lower voice. 'The old people are

very proud of this one, and the way he has got on in his profession.'

'Well,' said Edith, 'he is very good-looking, at all events. I hope he will come and make up a little party at the *table d'hôte;* it will be an amusement. Very good-looking I call him. It must be his eyes. They are very extraordinary, to be so clear and yet so dark in the blue; I never saw eyes like that before.'

Nan, sitting silent and indignant, considered that it was more than ridiculous—it was unfeminine, it was altogether abominable—for a girl to talk like that about a man's eyes. If she had spoken about the shape of his forehead, and admired that, then that would have been sensible enough; but to talk about his eyes as if he were a doll—as if he were a wax figure in a hair-dresser's window—as if he were

one of the idiotic beauty-youths of the King's Road—that stirred her to revolt altogether. But Edith always was a gaby.

At half-past nine Frank King called, and was very kindly and gravely received by the two elder girls. But he made no pretence of being there by accident. He said he had remembered Miss Beresford's telling him that they were to cross the Splügen into Italy; and as he was quite alone, he thought he would choose the same route on the chance of running across them somewhere. And they would see something of each other on the road. It was true he had only two horses, and doubtless they had four; but the return carriage he had hired was a light little thing, and he had scarcely any luggage; and no doubt he would meet them again at lunch. Did they propose to lunch at

Thusis? It was at Thusis they proposed to lunch. He should most likely see them at Thusis; meantime he would only say *au revoir.*

So, in due course, the great old-fashioned chariot was brought round, the four horses shaking their heads and jangling their bells; and the luggage of the girls, which was considerable, was corded on behind; and the maid got on the box, and then the girls themselves appeared and took their places, and the landlord bowed and took off his hat, and the driver cracked an enormous whip, and away they went from Chur along the level river valley, by the perpetual maize-fields, under the gray scarred mountains. It was a changeable, doubtful-looking day, with gleams of sunlight and sudden darkenings over of rain-cloud; but the rapid motion of the com-

fortable old carriage kept them merry enough. Farther and farther into the mysterious mountain-land they went; rattling through small towns with violently coloured frescoes on the walls; swinging along the valley road, with always the turbid rushing river below; passing innumerable ruined towers perched on precipitous crags; and generally wondering when the serious business of climbing the Alps was to begin. The mountains had grown grander now, and there were snow-slopes gleaming afar in the wan sunlight. It was not a settled sort of sunlight at all. Just as they entered Thusis they were caught by a smart shower, and were glad to take refuge in the inn.

Now, Miss Beresford had only finished ordering luncheon—which she did in excellent German, of a clear, hard, Hano-

verian kind—when in walked Frank King, very pleased to rejoin them, apparently quite delighted with the rain, and plainly anxious to be allowed to join their table. That was what it came to. Moreover, as luncheon proceeded, the mountains outside darkened.

'We are in for a bad afternoon,' said he; and then he added, in an off-hand way, 'Does your maid speak German, Miss Beresford?'

'Parsons speaks nothing but English,' said Miss Beresford.

'And that indifferently,' added Nan.

'Oh! Because, you see, it will be uncommonly hard for her to be sitting there till evening, not speaking a word, and facing pelting rain all the time.'

'She can come in beside us,' said Nan, promptly.

'I was going to suggest,' said he in the same off-hand fashion, 'that—I only mean if it rains—if it rains, I was going to suggest, don't you see, that she could have my trap, if she chose, and then—then if you wouldn't mind giving me a seat in your carriage, which has plenty of room, I should think——'

'It is rather a roundabout way out of the difficulty,' said Miss Beresford laughing; 'but we shall be very pleased if you will come into our carriage, if it rains.'

And it did. It was through streaming window panes that they beheld the gloomy gorge of the Via Mala, with the pine-clad mountains rising sheer overhead, and far below the thundering of the Rhine along the narrow and twisting chasm. It was but vaguely that they knew of the wonderful tunnels through the rocks, and the over-

hanging precipices, and the rich-coloured, dripping autumn foliage, and the hideous declivities that went down to the roaring and swollen torrent. But it has been remarked before now that in the case of driving parties people's spirits always get highest in bad weather. Whether they get into a sort of despairing madness, or whether it is out of a reckless defiance, the fact remains that the finest enjoyment of a driving trip is experienced in pouring rain. And that party of four, within the shut-up old chariot, seemed merry enough. Their talking and laughing quite drowned the roaring of the river. Nan was a trifle silent, perhaps; but then Frank King did talking for two, and he had innumerable adventures and stories to tell relating to every corner of the earth. He had no longer any official gravity to observe. His

laughter was so genuine as to be infectious; even Nan felt herself smiling, though she thought that the commander of a man-of-war ought not to go on like this. And how could Frank King, who had been practically all his life at sea, know so much about the rustics in Wiltshire? How could he have gone through those poaching adventures, for example? She knew that Kingscourt was in Wiltshire; but if, as he had told her, he was in the navy when the English fleet paid its famous visit to Cherbourg, he must have left Wiltshire when he was a very small boy indeed.

They got higher and higher into the mountains as the evening fell, and the mists closed down upon them. Outside they heard nothing but the rattle of the rain on the top of the carriage, and the tinkle of the horses' bells. By and by the lamps were

lit. Later they were in absolute blackness —plunging through the streaming night; but they were contented enough.

When the carriage stopped they were quite surprised. Splügen already! And where was the inn? Frank King sprang out, and found himself in a sort of big square, with the rain pelting down, and the building opposite him apparently closed. But presently a man appeared with a lantern, who informed him that they could have beds certainly, but in the *dépendance*, as the hotel was overcrowded. Then the gentleman with the lantern disappeared.

It was fortunate, indeed, for these young ladies that they had a male protector and champion with them; for the bad weather had detained many people, the hotel was crammed full, and as this was the *table d'hôte* hour, the landlord and all his staff,

with every disposition in the world to be obliging, were at their wits' end. Every one was wanted in the dining-chamber: how could any one look after the new arrivals, or show them their rooms on the other side of the square, or attend to their luggage? Now it was that this young sailor began to show a touch of authority. First of all he got the young ladies to descend, and bundled them into the little reading-room; that was clearing the decks for action. The last they saw of him was that he had seized a man by the collar and was quietly, but firmly, taking him to the door, addressing him the while in an extraordinary mixture of French and German concerning luggage, and rooms, and the necessity of a lantern to show people across the square. In about a quarter of an hour he returned, dripping wet.

'Well, that's all settled,' he said, cheerfully, as he dried his face with his handkerchief. 'I've seen the rooms—very big, and bare, and cold, but the best they have. And I've left Miss Parsons in the kitchen, tearing her hair over some things that have got wet. And I've got four places at the *table d'hôte*, which is going on. Now, if you wish to go and see your rooms and dress for dinner, there is a little girl waiting with a lantern; or if you prefer going in to the *table d'hôte* at once——'

'Oh, certainly,' said Miss Beresford. 'Let us take it when we can get it. They won't mind us going in as we are. We all look respectable enough, if it wasn't for Nan's hair: she must have been asleep.'

'At all events, you will find it warm in here,' said he, leading the way, 'and that's something. The bedrooms will make you

shiver ; they look like a jail. You must remember you are up some height now.'

So crowded and busy was the modest little Speisesaal that they entered quite unnoticed, and found themselves relegated to a small side-table at the upper end of the room. It was a most comfortable and excellent arrangement, and the pleasant good-humour that had prevailed throughout the afternoon did not desert them now. Even Nan began to make little jokes—in her quiet way ; and as for Lieutenant Frank King he was so particularly civil to everybody that the landlord himself went away to get the wine he had ordered.

'One thing is certain,' said Frank King. 'We are in a capital position for raking that dinner-table from end to end with criticism. Look at the big man in the middle. Did you ever see anybody so

pompous, and stilted, and portentous? He never speaks. I believe he must be first cousin to the Sphinx.'

'He is only the centre of gravity; every dinner-table should have that, you know,' said Nan, shyly.

He gave her a quick look and said,

'Do you know, Miss Anne, you have made a great discovery? You have discovered the *raison d'être* of stupid people.'

'Have I?' said Nan, with a laugh. 'Then I must be first cousin to M. Jourdain.'

'They are the ballast of the social ship, don't you see?' he said eagerly. 'You can't sail a ship without ballast; and without the weight of the stupid people the feather-headed people—the topsail-headed people—would tear everything out of her and send her flying. And so you want a good substantial centre of gravity at a

dinner-table, as you say; a solid root for lighter things to branch from; a buffer coming between the electric sparks——'

'I am afraid we are getting a little bit mixed,' said Mary Beresford, with her cold smile.

'I wish, Lieutenant King,' said Edith, who was just a trifle annoyed, 'that you would begin and talk to Nan about logarithms and co-sines and triangles and things like that. She crushes us, because we don't know. Now we should like to see her found out.'

'I am too wise to try anything of the kind,' said Frank King, laughing. 'It might be the other way round; it is more likely that Miss Nan would find me out.'

So they chatted, and the evening passed cheerfully and pleasantly; and they retired to rest early, for they had to start betimes

in the morning. Already Lieutenant Frank King seemed quite to belong to the party; it was the most natural thing in the world that he should sit at the same table and order things for them. And no one noticed —he did not notice it himself—that he had advanced from 'Miss Anne' to 'Miss Nan.' Perhaps he would soon drop the 'Miss' altogether.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SNOW AND MIST AND SUNLIGHT.

THE desolation of that next morning! A wonder of snow outside the windows—the large dark flakes slowly, noiselessly passing the panes; snow on the open space fronting the great, gaunt hostelry; snow on the small spire of the church; and snow on the far reaches of the hills, retreating up there into the gray mists, where every pine tree was a sharp black thing on the broad expanse of white. The girls were greatly downcast. They had their breakfast brought to them in the big cold

room; they took it hurriedly, with scarcely a word. They saw Parsons rushing across the square; when she came in there were flakes of snow in her hair, and her fingers were blue with cold.

'The English go abroad for pleasure,' said Edith, with sarcasm.

By and by they heard the jingle of the bells outside, and on going below they found Frank King in the doorway, encased from head to foot in an ulster.

'This is indeed luck—this is great luck,' said he, blithely.

'Luck do you call it?' said Edith Beresford.

'Certainly,' said he; 'the first snow of the year! Most opportune. Of course you must see the Splügen Pass in snow.'

'We shan't see anything,' said Edith in gloom.

'Never mind,' said Miss Beresford, good-naturedly; 'we shall have crossed the Alps in a snowstorm, and that sounds well. And I daresay we shall amuse ourselves somehow. Do you feel inclined to give up your carriage to-day again?'

She had turned to Frank King. There was a smile on her face, for she guessed that it was no great sacrifice on his part. Moreover, she had enjoyed that drive the day before; the presence of a fourth person broke the monotony of the talking of three girls together. It is needless to add that Frank King eagerly welcomed her proposal, and in due course the two carriages drove away from the big, bare hostelry to enter the unknown mountain-world.

A strange world they found it, when once they had left the level of the little valley and begun to climb the steep and

twisting road cut on the face of the mountain. The aspect of things changed every few minutes, as the rolling mists slowly blotted out this or that portion of the landscape, or settled down so close that they could see nothing but the wet snow in the road, and the black-stemmed pines beyond, with their green branches stretching out towards them through the pall of cloud. Then sometimes they would look down into extraordinary gulfs of mist—extraordinary because, far below them, they would find the top of a fir tree, the branches laden with snow, the tree itself apparently resting on nothing—floating in mid air. It was a phantasmal world altogether, the most cheerful feature of it being that at last the snow had ceased to fall.

This decided Nan to get out for a walk.

'You will be wet through,' her elder sister exclaimed.

'My boots are thick,' said Nan, 'and Parsons has my waterproof.'

When she had got down, and disappeared, Miss Beresford said,

'She is a strange girl; she always wants to be alone.'

'She seems to think a great deal, and she always thinks in her own way,' said Frank King. 'No doubt she prefers to be alone; but—but don't you think I ought to get out and see that she is all right?'

'There are no brigands in these mountains, are there?' said Miss Beresford, laughing.

'And she can't lose her way,' said the more serious Edith, 'unless she were to fall over the side.'

'I think I will get out,' he said, and he called to the driver.

He found that Nan was already some way ahead, or rather overhead; but he soon overtook her. She was startled when she saw him, for the snow had deadened the sound of his approach.

'I believe it will clear soon,' he said at a venture.

'It is altogether very strange,' Nan said in something of a lower voice. 'The fir-trees laden with snow like that, the cold, the gloom: it looks like some bygone Christmas come back suddenly. It is strange to find yourself in another part of the year: yesterday, summer; to-day, winter. I should not be surprised to meet a cart filled with holly, or to hear the bells ringing for morning service.'

'You know there are people who never

see winter,' said he; 'I wonder what it feels like when you move from place to place so as to live in a perpetual spring and summer.'

'I don't think it can be the real spring,' she said, after a second. 'The summer, I suppose, is the same anywhere; it hasn't the newness and the strangeness of the spring. Wouldn't it be a nice thing now to be able to take some poor English lady who has been compelled to live all the early months of each year in the south, among hot-house sort of things, and just to show her for a minute a little English village in the real spring time, such as she must have known when she was a girl, with the daffodils in the cottage gardens, and the young leaves on the elm and the hawthorn. And perhaps a lark would be singing high up; and there might be a

scent of wallflower; and the children coming home with daisy wreaths. She would cry, perhaps; but she would like it better than the hot-house flowers and the Riviera. There are some things that have a wonderful way of bringing back old memories—the first smell of wallflower in the spring is one, and the first fall of snow in the winter. And there's an old-fashioned kind of musky smell, too, that always means Sunday clothes, and a tall pew, and a village choir.'

'But you seem to have a strong faculty of association,' said young Frank King, who was far more interested in Nan than in musk.

'I don't know,' she said, carelessly. 'I don't study myself much. But I know I have a strong bump of locality—isn't that what they call it? I wish I had been born

in a splendid place. I wish I had been born among great mountains, or amongst remote sea islands, or even beautiful lake scenery; and I know I should have loved my native place passionately and yearned for it; and I should have thought it was the most beautiful place in the world—especially when I was away from it—for that's the usual way. But when you are born in London and live in Brighton, you can't make much out of that.'

Then she added, with some compunction,

'Not but that I am very fond of the south coast. I know it so well; and of course you get fond of anything that you are very intimate with, especially if other people don't know much about it. And there is far more solitariness about the south coast than the people imagine who

come down to the Bedford Hotel for a week.'

'You are a great walker, are you not?' he said.

'Oh, no; but I walk a good deal.'

'And always alone?'

'Generally. It is very seldom I have a companion. Do you know Singing Sal?'

'Singing Sal? No. How should I? Who is she?'

'A kind of tramping musician,' said Nan, with a grave smile. 'She is a friend of the fishermen and coastguardsmen and sailors down there; I dare say some of your men must have heard of her. She is a good-looking woman, and very pleasant in her manner, and quite intelligent. I have seen her very often, but I never made her acquaintance till the week before last.'

'Her acquaintance!'

'Yes,' said Nan, simply; 'and I mean to renew it when I get back, if mamma will let me. Singing Sal knows far more about the coast than I do, and I want to learn more. . . . Oh, look!'

Both of them had been for some time aware of a vague luminousness surrounding them, as if the sun wanted to get through the masses of vapour; but at this moment she, happening to turn her head, found that the wind had in one direction swept away the mist, and behold, far away in the valley beneath them, they could see the village of Splügen, shining quite yellow in the sunlight. Then the clouds slowly closed over the golden little picture, and they turned and walked on. But in front of them, overhead, the wind was still at work, and there were threads of keen blue now appearing over the twisting

vapours. Things began to be more cheerful. Both the carriages behind had been thrown open. Nan's face looked pink, after one's eyes had got so used to the whiteness of the snow.

'I suppose there are no people so warmly attached to their country as the Swiss are,' she said (she was not ordinarily a chatterbox, but the cold, keen air seemed to have vivified her). 'I am very glad the big thieves of the world left Switzerland alone. It would have been a shame to steal this little bit from so brave a people. Do you know the song of the Swiss soldier in the trenches at Strasburg? I think it is one of the most pathetic songs in the world.'

'No, I don't,' he said. How delighted he was to let her ramble on in this way, revealing the clear, beautiful soul, as Singing Sal might have thought.

'He tells the story himself,' she continued. 'It is the sound of the Alphorn that has brought this sorrow to him, he says. He was in the trenches at night, and he heard the sound of the Alphorn far away, and nothing would do but that he must try to escape and reach his fatherland by swimming the river. Then he is taken, and brought before the officers, and condemned to be shot; and he only asks his brother soldiers to fire straight—— But I am not going to spoil it.'

She put her hand up furtively for a second to her eyes, and then she said cheerfully—

'I have had enough walking. Suppose we wait for the carriage?'

'I think I ought to apologise to you, Miss Anne,' said he. 'You prefer walking by yourself—I ought not to have come and bothered you.'

'It is of no consequence,' said Nan, looking back for the carriage, 'so long as you haven't wet your feet.'

They got into the carriage and continued on their way; and very soon it became apparent, from the flashes of sunlight and gleams of blue, that they had worked their way up through the cloud-layers. In process of time, indeed, they got clear of the mists altogether, and emerged on to the higher valleys of the Alps—vast, sterile, the white snow-plains glittering in the sun, except where the rocks showed through in points of intense black. There were no longer any pines. They were in a world of snow and barren rocks and brilliant sunlight, with a cold luminous blue sky overhead; themselves the only living creatures visible; their voices sounding strangely distinct in the silence.

When they were quite at the summit of the pass, a smurr, as we say in Scotland, came over; but it did not last. By the time they had got the drags on the wheels, the vast gorge before them—descending and winding until it disappeared in a wall of mountains of the deepest blue—was again filled with sunlight; and now they began to be a little bit sheltered from the wind as the horses trotted and splashed through the wet snow, carrying them away down into Italy.

They lunched at Campo Dolcino, still some thousands of feet above the level of the sea. Then on again, swinging away at a rapid pace down into a mighty valley; rattling through galleries cut in the solid rock; then out again into the grateful sunlight; taking the sharp curves of the road at the same breakneck speed; with always

below them—and so far below them that it was silent—a rushing river sweeping down between fair pastures and dots of villages. As the evening fell, this clatter of hoofs and wheels came to a sudden end; for they were entering the town of Chiavenna, and there you must go at walking pace through the narrow little thoroughfares. It was strange for them to come down from the snow-world into this ordinary little town, and to find in the hotel not only all sorts of products of a high civilisation, but even people who were speaking the familiar English tongue.

There was a telegram addressed 'Lieutenant F. H. King, R.N.,' in the case in the bureau; when Frank King had got it out and read it he was silent for a second or two.

'I hope there is no bad news,' said Miss Beresford, in a kindly way. She was

not a very sympathetic person; but Frank King had brightened up their tour during these last two days, and she was in a measure grateful to him.

'No,' he said, absently. 'Oh, no, not bad news. The telegram is from the officer I left in charge of the *Fly-by-Night;* I rather think that I shall be setting out for home again in a couple of days.'

'Oh, I am sorry for that,' she said, quite naturally.

'You go on again to-morrow, Miss Beresford?'

We were proposing to do so.'

'And where do you think of going to when you get to Lake Como?'

'Bellagio, most probably.'

'Oh, well, I will go with you as far as Bellagio, if I may,' he said, somewhat thoughtfully.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE SERENATA.

NEXT morning also he was preoccupied and anxious, insomuch that even Nan noticed it, and good-naturedly hoped he had had no bad news. He started somewhat.

'No, oh no,' he said. 'Only the telegram I got last night makes it necessary for me to start for home to-morrow.'

'Then, at least,' said Nan cheerfully, 'you will see Lake Como before you go.'

Her eldest sister smiled in her superior way.

'Nan's head is full of romance,' she said.

'She expects to see the Como of the print-shops: don't you, Nan? Blue water and golden boats, and pink hills, and Claude Melnotte's castle lifting its—whatever was it?—to eternal summer. I am afraid the quotation is not quite correct.'

And the truth was that, despite this warning, Nan did seem somewhat disappointed, when, after hours of rattling and splashing along a muddy road, they came upon a stretch of dirty, chalky-green water that in a manner mirrored the gray and barren crags above it.

'That isn't Como!' cried Nan. 'It can't be.'

'Oh, but it is,' Miss Beresford said, laughing. 'At least it's the upper end of it.'

But Nan would not believe it; and when at last they reached Colico, and

fought their way through the crowd of swarthy good-for-nothings who strove to attach themselves to every scrap of luggage, and when they had got on board the steamer and secured commanding positions on the upper deck, then Nan declared that they were about to see the real Lake of Como. It was observed that the young sailor glanced once or twice rather anxiously at the sky and the seething clouds.

Well, they sailed away down through this stretch of pallid green water, that was here and there ruffled with wind, and here and there smooth enough to reflect the silver-gray sky; and they called at successive little villages; and they began to be anxious about a certain banking up of purple clouds in the south-west. They forgot about the eternal summer, and got out their waterproofs. They were glad to

find themselves drawing near to Bellagio, and its big hotels, and villas, and terraced gardens. The wind had risen; the driven green water was here and there hissing white; and just as they were landing, a pink flash of lightning darted across that dense wall of purple cloud, and there was a long and reverberating rattle of thunder.

'It seems to me we have just got in in time,' said Frank King in the hall of the hotel.

The storm increased in fury. The girls could scarcely dress for dinner through being attracted to the window by the witches' cantrips outside. The thunder blackness in the south-west had deepened; the wind was whirling by great masses of vapour; the water was springing high along the terraces; and the trees in the terraced gardens were blown this way and

that, even though their branches were heavy with rain. Then it was that Edith Beresford said—

'Nan, you ought to persuade Lieutenant King to stay over another day. He hasn't seen Como. This isn't Como.'

'I?' said Nan, sharply. 'What have I to do with it? He can go or stay as he pleases.'

'Besides,' continued Edith, 'in consequence of this *tempo cattivo*——'

'I suppose that means weather that rains cats and dogs,' said Nan, whose anger was of the briefest duration.

'——the grand *Serenata* is put off till to-morrow night. Now he ought to stay and see the illuminations of the boats.'

'The illuminations,' said Nan. 'I should think he had something else to think of.'

Nevertheless, when, at dinner, Miss

Edith was good enough to put these considerations before Lieutenant King, he seemed very anxious to assent, and he at once called for a time-table; and eventually made out that by taking the night train somewhere or other, he could remain at Bellagio over the next day. And he was rewarded, so far as the weather went. The morning was quite Como-like—fair and blue and calm; the sun shining on the far wooded hills, and on the sparkling little villages at their foot; the green lake still running high, with here and there a white tip breaking; a blaze of sunlight on the gardens below—on the green acacia-branches and the masses of scarlet salvia—and on the white hot terraces where the lizards lay basking.

It was a long, idle, delicious day; and somehow he contrived to be near Nan

most of the time. He was always anxious to know what she thought about this or about that; he directed her attention to various things; he sometimes talked to her about his ship—and about what sailors thought of when they were far from home and friends. They went out on the lake—these four; the hot sun had stilled the water somewhat; reclining in the cushioned stern of the boat, in the shelter of the awning, they could hear the bells on shore faint and distant. Or they walked in that long allée leading from one end of the gardens—the double line of short chestnuts offering cool and pleasant shadow; the water lapping along the stone parapet beside them; and between each two of the stems a framed picture, as it were, of the lake and the velvet-soft slopes beyond. It was all very pretty, they said. It was a

trifle commonplace, perhaps; there were a good many hotels and little excursion steamers about; and perhaps here and there a suggestion of the toy-shop. But it was pretty. Indeed, towards sunset, it was very nearly becoming something more. Then the colours in the skies deepened; in the shadows below the villages were lost altogether; and the mountains, growing more and more sombre under the rich gold above, began to be almost fine. One half forgot the Cockneyism and familiarity of the place, and for a moment had a glimpse of the true loneliness and solemnity of the hills.

As the dusk fell they began to bethink themselves of what was before them.

'It would have been a bad thing for the musicians from La Scala if they had at-

tempted to go out last evening,' Miss Beresford remarked.

'It will be a bad thing for us,' said Edith, who was the musical one, 'if we attempt to go on board their steamer this evening. It will be far too loud. You should never be too near. And, especially where there is water, music sounds so well at some distance.'

'You can hire a small boat, then,' said Nan. 'They are all putting up their Chinese lanterns.'

'Oh, I wouldn't advise that,' said Frank King, quickly. 'I don't think it would be safe.'

'A sailor afraid of boats!' said Miss Edith with a laugh.

'Oh, as for that,' said Nan, warmly, 'every one knows that it's those who are most ignorant of boats who are most

reckless in them. It's very easy to be brave if you're stupidly ignorant. I know papa used to say it was always the most experienced sportsman who took most care about unloading his gun on going into a house. Why, if you're walking along the pier, and see some young fools standing up in a boat and rocking it until the gunwale touches the water, you may be sure they're haberdashers down from the borough for a day, who have never been in a boat before.'

In the dusk they could not see that Frank King's face flushed with pleasure at this warm defence; but he only said quietly,

'You see there will be ten or twelve steamers churning about in the dark; and if some careless boatman were to make a mistake—or lose his head—you might be under the paddles in a second. I think

you should either get on board or stay ashore; and I should say you were as well off here as anywhere. You will see the procession on the lake very well; and even if they should halt over there at Cadenabbia for the music, we could hear it here excellently.'

'It is very good advice, Edith,' said Miss Beresford, seriously. 'I don't at all like small boats. And there goes the first dinner-bell; so let's make haste.'

At dinner Frank King did not say much; he seemed to be thinking of his departure on the morrow. Once, however, when they happened to be talking about Brighton, he looked across the table to Nan, and said,

'Oh, by-the-way, what was the name of the woman you told me about—whom you met on the downs?'

'Singing Sal,' answered Nan, with composure.

'I shall ask about her when I get to Portsmouth,' he said.

'She is seldom in the big towns; she prefers tramping by herself along the country roads.'

'Is this another of Nan's *protegées?*' asked Miss Beresford. 'She knows the most extraordinary people. She is like the children when they are sent down to the beach when the tide is low; they are always most delighted with the monstrous and hideous things they can pick up.'

'You must have seen Singing Sal,' said Nan, quietly. 'And she is neither monstrous nor hideous. She is very well dressed, and she sings with a great deal of feeling.'

'Perhaps she will come and have after-

noon tea with us?' said Edith, with a sarcastic air.

'I don't think she would find it interesting enough,' Nan answered, calmly.

When, after dinner, they went out on to the balcony above the garden, they found that the wonders of the night had already begun. Far on the other side of the lake the houses of Cadenabbia were all ablaze with millions of small gold points, the yellow glow from which glimmered down on the black water. Then in the garden here, there were rows upon rows of Chinese lanterns, of all colours, just moving in the almost imperceptible breeze; while along the shore, the villas had their frontage-walls decorated with brilliant lines of illuminated cups, each a crimson, or white, or emerald star. Moreover, at the steps of the terrace below, there was a great bustle

of boats; and each boat had its pink paper lantern glowing like a huge firefly in the darkness; and there was a confusion of chaffering and calling with brightly dressed figures descending by the light of torches, and disappearing into the unknown. Then these boats began to move away—with their glow-worm lanterns swaying in the black night. The hotel seemed almost deserted. There was silence along the shores.

By and by, at a great distance, they beheld a wonderful thing come slowly into view—far away in the open space of darkness that they knew to be the lake. It was at first only a glow of crimson; but as it came nearer, this glow separated into points, each point a ruby-coloured shaft of fire, and they saw that this must be a steamer illuminated by red lamps. And

then another steamer, and another, came sailing up, with different colours gleaming; until one, far higher than the others—a great mass of glittering gold—appeared in the midst of them, and round this all the fleet of small boats, that were, of course, only distinguishable by their parti-coloured lanterns, seemed to gather.

'That is the steamer that has the musicians, clearly,' said Frank King.

'Yes; but I don't hear any music,' answered Edith, in a voice that seemed rather ominous.

They sat and waited. The last of the guests had got into the small boats and gone away; they were left alone in front of the big hotel. The moon was rising behind the hills in the south, and already the surface of the lake was beginning to declare itself—a dull blue-black.

'I cannot hear the least sound; is it possible they can be playing?' said Edith, disappointedly.

It was a beautiful spectacle, at all events, even if there were no sound accompanying it. For now the moon had risen clear, and there was a pale soft light all along the northern hills, and just enough radiance lying over the bosom of the lake to show the darkness of the hulls of the distant steamers. And then, as they watched, some order seemed to grow out of that confusion of coloured lights; the high golden mass drew away; and then the others followed, until the long undulating line seemed like some splendid meteor in the night. There was no sound. Cadenabbia, with all its yellow fire, was as clearly deserted as this Bellagio here, with all its paper lanterns and coloured cups. The

procession had slowly departed. The *Serenata* was taking place somewhere else. The gardens of this hotel were silent but for the occasional voices of Frank King and his companions.

Well, they laughed away their disappointment; and chatted pleasantly, and enjoyed the beautiful night, until Miss Beresford thought it was time for them to go indoors.

'But where's Nan?' she said. 'That girl is never to be found.'

'I think I can find her,' said Frank King, rising hastily. He had been regarding for some time back that long allée between the chestnuts, and a dark figure there that was slowly pacing up and down, occasionally crossing the patches of moonlight. When he had got about half-way along, he found Nan leaning with her

elbows on the parapet, and looking out on the moonlit lake.

'Oh, Miss Anne,' he said, 'your sister wants you to come indoors.'

'All right,' she said cheerfully, raising herself and preparing to go.

'But I want to say a word to you,' he said hurriedly. 'I have been trying for an opportunity these two days. I hope you won't think it strange or premature or impertinent——'

'Oh no,' said Nan, with a sudden fear of she knew not what; 'but let us go indoors.'

'No, here, now,' he pleaded. 'Only one moment. I know we are young; perhaps I should not ask you to pledge yourself, but all I ask for is to be allowed to hope. Surely you understand. Nan, will you be my wife—some day?'

He would have taken her hand; but she withdrew quickly, and said with a sort of gasp,

'Oh, I am so sorry. I had no idea. It must be my fault, I am sure; but I did not know—I was not thinking of such a thing for a moment——'

'But you will give me leave to hope?' he said. 'I mean some day—not now.'

'Oh no, no!' she said with an earnestness that was almost piteous. 'If I have made a mistake before, this must be clear now. Oh, don't think of such a thing. It never could be—never, never. I am very sorry if I have pained you; but—but you don't know anything about me; and you will soon forget, for we are both far too young—at least I am—to think of such things; and—and I am very, very sorry.'

'But do you mean that I am never to

think of it again, even as a hope?' he said, slowly.

'Oh, I do mean that—I do! If there has been a mistake, let it be clear now. Can I not be your friend?'

She held out her hand. After a second or so of hesitation, he took it.

'I know more of you than you suspect,' he said slowly, and with a touch of hopelessness in his voice. 'I could see what you were the first half-hour I had spoken to you. And I know you know your own mind, and that you are sincere. Well, I had hoped for something else; but even your friendship will be valuable to me—when I have had a little time to forget.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you!' said Nan, somewhat incoherently. 'I know you will be wise. You have your profession to think of; that is of far more importance. I know

you will be wise, and generous too, and forgive me if the fault has been mine. Now, we will not speak of any such thing again; let it be as if it had never been. Come.'

He pressed her hand in silence—it was a token of good-bye. These two did not see each other again for more than three years.

## CHAPTER X.

### JINNY.

One night towards the end of that interval a strange scene occurred in the old manor-house of Kingscourt, Wiltshire. From an early part of the evening it was apparent that something unusual was about to take place. The sleepy old mansion was all astir, a big fire blazed in the fireplace of the hall, and even the long corridor, which was in effect a picture-gallery, and ordinarily looked rather grim with its oak panelling and dusky portraits and trophies of arms, had been so brilliantly lit up that it seemed almost cheerful.

There was no cheerfulness, however, on the face of the lord of the manor himself; and there was nothing but a keen and anxious sympathy in the regard of his friend the Vicar, who had come to keep him company. The former, Stephen Holford King, was a hale old man of over seventy, with a smoothly-shaven face grown red with exposure to the weather, silvery short-cropped hair, and fine, impressive features. His old college friend, the Rev. Mr. Lynnton, was a smaller man, and somewhat younger, though his pale face had a sad expression, as though he had come through much trouble. He also was clean shaven, which added character to his clear-cut features. His chest was narrow, and he stooped a little.

'It is kind of you to come early, Vicar,' said the taller man, who seemed much

agitated in spite of his outwardly firm demeanour. 'It will be a terrible ordeal for my poor wife. I wish the evening were over.'

'You must face it like a man, friend King,' said the other. 'You have acted rightly, great as the pain must be to yourself. It is the young man's last chance, and surely he accepts it or he would not be coming at all. And—she—also.'

'If only he hadn't married her—if only he hadn't married her. She might have ruined him in pocket, as she has ruined others before; but, to come in here——'

He glanced at the portraits along the walls; he seemed scarcely to know what he was saying.

'You might preach a sermon from what I am suffering now, Vicar. Oh, I deserve it. My pride has been taken

down at last. But the punishment is hard——'

'Pardon me, friend King; but you exaggerate surely. Surely a certain measure of family pride is justifiable; it ought to nerve a man to be worthy of those who have gone before him. Nor have I ever thought that your feeling about your name being a heritage that you had to guard jealously and piously was otherwise than just——'

'Five centuries, Vicar—for five centuries the Kings of Kingscourt, whether knights or commoners, have been gentlemen—gentlemen every man of them; and this is the end!'

'But even now, old friend, you must not look at the blackest side of things. Alfred may requite you yet by his conduct for the tremendous sacrifice you and Mrs.

King are making. He has committed a social crime; but surely that is better than living in sin——'

'Vicar, I know you have tried to look only at the cheerful side of things, as far as your cloth will permit, and I trust in God that something may yet come of it; but if not—if this last appeal to him produces nothing more than the others—then there is a final alternative that may help me to save Kingscourt and the family name.'

'What is that?' his friend said, eagerly.

'I will not speak of it now; we must hope for the best.'

At this moment there was heard the rumbling of carriage wheels outside, and the old man started.

'Come, let us go into the hall,' he said quickly; and then he added, in a lower and agitated voice, 'Vicar, do you think

my poor wife will—will have to kiss this woman? That is what she dreads. That is what terrifies her.'

The pale-faced clergyman seemed embarrassed, and said hastily,

'There will be some confusion, no doubt. Come, friend King, pull yourself together. You are welcoming home your son and his newly-married wife, remember.'

The great bell rang, the servants swarmed into the hall, the door was opened, and outside, in the darkness, the carriage lamps were visible, shining down on the broad steps. At the same moment a lady came along from the corridor: a tall, elderly woman, with a pale, sweet face, quite white hair done up in old-fashioned little curls, and with eyes of a sad, benign expression. She seemed to be very pleased and cheerful; it was only the Vicar, who shook

hands with her, who knew that her whole frame was trembling.

'So you have come to welcome home the bride, Mr. Lynnton,' she said, in a clear voice, so that every one could hear. 'Alfred will be pleased to see you again, after his long absence. They say that being so much abroad has greatly improved him.'

'It could not well improve his appearance, Mrs. King; he was always a handsome lad,' said the Vicar—his eyes still turned towards the door.

This was, indeed, a strikingly handsome man who now came up the steps—taller and more massive than his brother Frank, lighter also in hair and eyes. At this first glance one scarcely noticed that his face was somewhat flushed, and that the light blue eyes had a sort of uncertain nervous throb in them.

'My wife, mother.'

The Vicar stared with astonishment. This pretty, bright-faced little thing did not look more than eighteen or nineteen, though in fact she was five-and-twenty; and in her tight-fitting ulster and plain gray hat, and quiet yellow-gray gloves, she looked the very embodiment of girlish grace, and neatness, and decorum.

The white-haired woman took this new visitor by both hands.

'I am glad you have come, my dear,' said she, without any quaver of the voice, and she kissed her first on one cheek and then on the other. 'But you must be tired with your long journey. Come, I will show you your dressing-room; they have taken some tea up for you.'

'And to-night we dine at seven, my dear,' said the father of the house, address-

ing her at the same time, 'for we thought you might be hungry after your journey. So don't take too much time in dressing, my dear; we are plain folks; we will see all your finery another night. Higgins, have Mrs. Alfred's boxes taken up at once.'

Mrs. Alfred meanwhile stood looking a little puzzled, a little amused, but not at all shy. She seemed to consider it rather a good joke.

'Go on, Jinny,' her husband said to her lazily; 'I shan't dress.'

'That is an old privilege of Alfred's, my dear,' said Mrs. King, leading the newcomer away. 'His father, now, hasn't missed dressing for dinner one evening since we were married, except the night the vicarage took fire. But I suppose young men are not so ceremonious now. Here is your room, my dear: Catherine is

bringing some hot water, and she will open your boxes for you.'

And the old lady herself went and stirred up the fire, and drew the low easy chair nearer to the little table where the tea-things were, and continued talking in the kindliest way to her new guest until the maid arrived. Mrs. Alfred had said nothing at all, but she seemed contented and amused.

At seven o'clock every one had assembled in the drawing-room except Mrs. Alfred. The Vicar's wife had arrived: she was a stout, anxious-eyed little woman, who was obviously alarmed, and talked much to assure those around her that she was quite at ease. Mr. Alfred himself was lazy, good-natured, indifferent—he had drunk two or three glasses of sherry meanwhile to pass the time.

Punctually at seven Mrs. Alfred appeared. She looked more prim and nice and neat than ever in this black silk dress with old lace on the open square in front and on the cuffs of the tight sleeves.

'Mrs. Lynnton—my daughter Jinny,' said the old white-haired lady, introducing the new-comer to the Vicar's wife.

Dinner was announced, and the big folding doors thrown open.

'My dear,' said Mr. King to his wife, 'I must take in Mrs. Alfred. It is a welcome home, you know. Alfred, you take in Mrs. Lynnton. Come along, child.'

And he gave her his arm with great ceremony, and led her into the long, old-fashioned dining-room, which was a blaze of candles, and gave her the seat at his right hand, and immediately called for a fire-screen lest the fire should be too much.

'Or will you sit the other side, my dear?' said he.

'Oh no, sir,' she said, very prettily, out of compliment to his age. 'Oh no, sir, I am best pleased to sit where you wish me to sit.'

For by this time the amused look had gone out of her face, and she seemed to have grown sensible of the great kindness these people were trying to show her.

Dinner went on, and the conversation rested mainly between Mr. Alfred, who was asking questions about the people in the neighbourhood, and the Vicar, who answered him. But when anything amusing was said, it was addressed to Mrs. Alfred, or else they looked to see whether she was pleased; and she received a great deal of attention from the old gentleman next her, and had many kind things said

to her by his wife. But Mrs. Alfred's face grew more and more strange. She seemed depressed and troubled—timid at the same time and self-conscious; once or twice her lips were tremulous. And then all at once she rose, and quickly went to where Mrs. King sat, and threw herself on her knees, and clasped the old lady's knees, and burst into a wild fit of sobbing and crying. The old lady turned very pale, and put her hand on the younger woman's head gently. The servants pretended to see nothing. Mr. Alfred flushed angrily, and said—

'Jinny, don't make a fool of yourself. Go back to your seat.'

Then the elder woman raised her, with a tenderness and compassion not altogether assumed, and led her back, saying—

'You are tired, my dear. I thought

you looked tired, my dear. We will let you go soon to bed to-night.'

Then everybody talked at once, and the little incident seemed easily forgotten. Moreover, as the evening progressed, old Stephen King convinced himself that he had done what was best for the bygone Kings of Kingscourt and any Kings of Kingscourt there might be. He would pay off his son's debts once more. These two would be content to remain for years in the country, till bygones should be bygones elsewhere; and even in the country the neighbours might pretend to a convenient ignorance. The Vicar would help him.

The Vicar and his wife left about ten; Mr. and Mrs. Alfred retired early; the various agitations that had shaken the old silver-haired dame gave place to a quies-

cence that was in a measure hopeful. Then sleep overtook the old manor-house, and the silence of the night.

About midnight there was a loud crash in the dining-room. Certain of the servants slept on the ground-floor for safety's sake; and the first one—indeed, the only one—to be thoroughly aroused by this sudden noise was the butler, a young man who had inherited the position from his father. He jumped up, hastily donned some clothes, and carried a light along to the room, wisely thinking that if it was only a picture that had fallen he need not alarm the whole household. At the same time he went cautiously, for he did not wish to be seized by the throat unawares.

He found the dining-room door open, and something, in the dark inside, lying prone on the floor. He pushed forward

his candle, and to his horror found it was Mrs. Alfred, who was slowly raising herself by both hands.

'Oh, ma'am, what has happened?' he cried.

'Be quiet. Where's the brandy?' she said, angrily; and then she put her hand to the side of her forehead. 'I've struck my head against something.'

This young man was a miracle of discretion, but he was startled. She did not talk incoherently, and yet she could not rise.

'Is it Mr. Alfred, ma'am? Shall I take him some brandy? I hope he isn't ill, ma'am?' he said in a breath.

'Mr. Alfred, you fool! He's been dead drunk in bed for more than an hour. Where's the brandy? Why don't you leave the spirit-stand out, you miserly thief?'

Then he saw how matters stood; and though he was frightened a little, he was prudent. He went and got some brandy and water in a tumbler; he coaxed her to go upstairs; he assisted her up; and then, having put her quietly into her room, he returned downstairs, and locked the dining-room door, putting the key in his pocket.

This incident the young butler kept discreetly to himself; he was not going to imperil his situation by telling such a story about his future master and mistress. All the same, the old father and mother began to grow very uneasy. Mrs. Alfred was too unwell to appear next day, nor would she see any one. She wanted brandy, however, to keep her system up. The following day the same legend was repeated. On the evening of that day Alfred King sought out his father in the

study, and said he wanted to speak to him.

'Look here, father, it's no use. I'll tell the truth. I came down here to humbug you, and get some more money out of you. But what's the good?—if Jinny had the wealth of the Rothschilds she'd run through it in a fortnight; and then her first trick would be to cut me. Oh, I know her; she's not a bad sort; but she's been brought up to be what she is, and she doesn't mean anything shabby, anything more than a cat thinks itself cruel when it plays with a mouse. Well, no matter.'

He rang the bell, ordered some brandy and soda, and continued:

'Now, I've got some pride in the old place, too, father: I don't want to see Jinny send Kingscourt spinning the moment you die. Well, this is what I pro-

pose. I'm no good. I'm played out. I've had my turn. Well, now, if you'll clear off my debts this time, and start me free with £5000—giving it in trust to somebody—so that I can have my £200 or £250 a year—then I'll consent to quash the entail; you bring home Frank, and give him Kingscourt. That's better than being a sailor, and he'll look after the old place.'

The old man regarded him calmly, but also with a strange, wistful, sad look.

'I had thought of it. But is there no other way, Alfred?'

'No. I'm broke. I'm done. If you want to save Kingscourt, that's the only way.'

'And you?'

'I've had my turn; I can't complain. Sooner or later Jinny'll bolt. Then I'll go

to the States and try my hand at something.'

'Do you know they've just made Frank commander?'

'He'll be glad to leave the navy, all the same. Fellows can't marry while they're in the navy.'

'What are your debts now, Alfred?'

Here the brandy and soda was brought in, which gave him time to think.

'I don't know exactly. Two brutes have got hold of me. I should fancy they could all be choked off with £8000—say £9000.'

'£14,000—it will be a heavy charge on the estate.'

'But I shall be off it. What's more, father, if Frank comes home, and gets married, and plays the good boy and all that kind of thing, don't let him get it into

his head that I am jealous of him, or that he has supplanted me. Frank is a fine chap. Tell him it was my proposal; and I hope he'll be a better son to you than I have been. Well, is it a bargain, father?'

The old man thought for some time, and at length said,

'Yes.'

'Well, then, there's another thing. Jinny's stumbled against something and got a black eye. Let's get her out of the house without the servants seeing her—this evening, after dusk. And I'll meet you any day you like at Shaen and Maskell's.'

This, then, was how it came about that Commander Francis Holford King, R.N., was summoned home from the West Indies, where he had been with his ship, the *Hellespont*. He was grave for his

years; and he was more manly in figure, somehow, and certainly browner of face, than when we last saw him at Bellagio, on Lake Como; but as he sailed past the Eddystone Light and entered the smooth waters of Plymouth Sound, there was something within him that told him his heart had not quite forgotten all its old memories.

## CHAPTER XI.

### TRANSFORMATION.

Captain Frank was everything and did everything that his parents could have hoped for, except in one direction: he would have nothing said about marriage. He came home without a murmur; he never uttered a word of regret about his giving up a profession that he had fair hopes of advancement in; he adopted his new set of duties with cheerfulness, and entered with zest into the festivities of the season. For the leaf was beginning to fall, and all the people about were preparing to shoot

the covers, so that parties had to be made up and invitations issued, and there soon came to be a general stir throughout the countryside. Captain Frank, though he was not much of a shot, took his share in all these things; but he held aloof from womankind, and would not have his marriage even spoken of by his most intimate relatives.

What was the man made of that he could resist a scene like this? Imagine an open glade in a beautiful Wiltshire wood on the morning after a slight fall of snow. The skies are blue, and the world is full of clear sunlight; the hollies are intensely green over the white of the snow; here and there on the bare branches are a few red leaves. Also on the snow itself there is a stain of brownish red in some places, where the light air of the

morning has shaken down withered needles from a tall pine-tree. Then there is a distant, sharp flutter; the noise increases; suddenly a beautiful thing—a meteor of bronze and crimson—comes whirring along at a tremendous pace; Captain Frank blazes away with one barrel and misses; before he knows where he is the pheasant seems a couple of miles off in the silver and blue of the sky, and he does not care to send the second barrel on a roving commission. He puts his gun over his shoulder, and returns to his pensive contemplation of the glittering green hollies, and the white snow, and the maze of bare branches going up into the blue.

But a new figure appears in the midst of this English-looking scene. A very pretty young lady comes along smiling—her pink cheeks looking all the pinker,

and her blue eyes all the bluer, because of the white snow and also the white fur round her neck. This is pretty Mary Coventry, who is staying at present at Kingscourt. She has the brightest of smiles, and the whitest of teeth.

'Cousin Frank,' she says, 'where do you gentlemen lunch to-day?'

'Look here,' he answers, 'you've come right up the line between the guns and the beaters.'

'Oh, that's all right,' she says, gaily. 'I know your father doesn't allow shooting at ground game into cover.'

'Lunch is to be up at the Hill Farm.'

'Oh, that's the very thing. I want a long walk. And I will help Higgins to have everything ready for you.'

'It will be very rough and tumble. You had much better go back home to lunch.'

'But I have come for the very purpose! I have brought sugar and cinnamon to mull the claret for you. You will find it scalding hot when you come.'

A hare ran by some dozen yards off: he did not fire.

'I see I am in your way. Good-bye for the present.'

'Good-bye. If you do mean to go up to the Hill Farm, you had better keep to the road. Or else,' he added, laughing, 'Mr. Ferrers will have something to say to you.'

'Well,' said pretty Mary Coventry to herself, as she passed on and into the road, 'he did not even thank me for all my trouble. And I always thought sailors were supposed to be nice. But perhaps he is lamenting some blackamoor sweetheart in Patagonia, and won't take any notice of anybody.'

It was about a week after this that Captain Frank, having run up to town, met a young gentleman in Piccadilly whom he seemed to recognise. He looked again —yes, it could be no other than Tom Beresford. But it was Tom Beresford transformed. Mr. Tom was now of age; he had his club, which he much frequented; he had assumed the air and manner of a man about town. That is to say, although he was clever enough and had a sufficient touch of humour, he cultivated a languid stare, and was chary of speech; and although he was a well-built young fellow, he walked with his elbows out and his knees in, as if the tightness of his trousers and his boots made it nigh impossible for him to walk at all. Moreover, his dress was more rigidly correct than ever; and of course

he carried the inevitable cane—inevitable as the walking-stick of the Athenian.

Frank King went up to him eagerly.

'Hallo, Beresford, how are you?'

'How are you?' was the answer, as a slight boyish blush somewhat interfered with the dignity of Mr. Tom. 'How are you? I heard you were at home again. I heard of you through the Strathernes.'

'And I heard of you in the same way,' said Captain King, who seemed greatly pleased to meet an old friend. 'I'll turn and walk with you. I've nothing particular to do.'

'Will you come and lunch with me?' said Mr. Tom (he had recovered himself after the inadvertent blush). 'We can walk along to the club.'

'Yes, I will,' said Frank King, heartily. 'Which is your club?'

'The Waterloo. They call it that because it isn't in Waterloo Place. It's in Regent Street.'

'All right,' said the other; but instantly he began to pursue his inquiries. 'Yes, I heard of you and your family from the Strathernes. There have been great changes since I left England. Your eldest sister is married, is she not?'

'You mean Moll: yes. They live in town—a small house back there in Mayfair. He used to be a richer man,' observed Mr. Tom, contemplatively, 'before he took silk.'

'But they are going to make him a judge, I hear.'

'Faith, then, I hope he'll never have to try me,' said Mr. Tom, with an air of conviction. 'He and I never could hit it off. I hate pompous people, and people who

give themselves airs. Now, I took a liking to you the first five minutes I saw you.'

Captain King was dutifully grateful for this condescension. He said he also hated pompous people—he couldn't bear them. And then he asked about Tom's sister Edith.

'She's engaged to be married, isn't she?'

'It's my belief,' said Mr. Tom, with a smile, 'that she has engaged herself to both of them, just to make sure; and that she can't make up her mind which to send off. I don't wonder at her pulling a wry mouth about having to marry a soda-water manufacturer; but Soda-water isn't half a bad sort of fellow, and he is fearfully rich. You see he is particularly beaming just now, for there have been two or three blazing hot summers running, and the

demand must have been tremendous. Then young Thynne, he's no end of a swell, no doubt; but you may be cousin to all kinds of earls and dukes without their giving you anything. I should fancy his father lets him have two or three hundred a year. I should like to see the Sentimental get along with that! You can't live on a fellow's ancestry. I think she should take Soda-water, even if he hasn't got anything like a father to speak of. And even if he hasn't got a father—this was what Nan said—he might be equally "*sans père et sans reproche.*"'

'It was your sister Anne said that, was it?' remarked Frank King, quickly.

'That was in her saucy days,' said Mr. Tom, sadly. 'It's quite different now. Now she's on the pious lay.'

'The what?' said Frank King. It was

clear that, however Mr. Tom had altered he had not chosen to improve his manner of speech.

'Oh, High Church and reredoses,' said the irreverent youth. 'Silver embroideries, don't you know, and visiting the poor, and catching all sorts of confounded infection. And then I suppose she'll end by marrying that curate that's always about the house. What a shame it is! She used to be such a brick. And to go and marry a curate.'

'I heard of that, too,' said Captain Frank, with a bit of a sigh. It was indeed among the first things he had heard after returning to England.

By this time they had reached Mr. Tom's club, which was pleasantly situated at a corner of the great thoroughfare, so that it had from its coffee-room windows

a spacious view, and was altogether a light and cheerful sort of place.

'But you don't ask about the Baby,' said Mr. Tom, as he was entering his friend's name in the strangers' book—the Waterloo being a hospitable little club that allowed visitors to come in at any hour. 'And the Baby *is* in a hole.'

'Well, it must be a sad thing for a baby to be in a hole; but I don't quite understand,' said Captain King.

'Don't you remember the Baby. The youngest? Madge?'

'Oh. Well, I only saw her once, I think. What is the matter with her?'

'First pick out what you want for lunch, and then I'll tell you.'

This was easily done; and the two friends sat down at a small window-table, which enabled them to glance out at the

passing crowd, and even as far as the Duke of York's column and the tops of the trees in St. James's Park.

'You see my sisters have all been wards in Chancery. I was also,' said Mr. Tom, with a slight blush; for he was no more than six months escaped from tutelage. 'I suppose the executors funked something about my father's will; at all events, they flung the whole thing in. Well, no great harm has come of it; not so much cost or worry as you would expect. Only the girls have had bad times of it about their sweethearts. I mean the Baby——'

'The Baby! How old is she?'

'Eighteen; and uncommonly good-looking, I think. Have some sherry. Well, the Baby made the acquaintance at somebody's house of a young fellow—son of a barrister—not a farthing but what he picks

up at pool. I don't think she meant anything—I don't a bit. There's a lot of that kind of nonsense goes on down there: Nan is the only one who has kept clear out of it. Well, the guardians didn't see it; and they went to the Court, and they got the Vice-Chancellor to issue an order forbidding young Hanbury from having any sort of communication with Madge. Now, you know, if you play any games with an order of that sort hanging over you, it's the very devil. It is. Won't you have some pickles?'

'And how is Miss Madge affected by the order?' asked Captain King.

'Oh,' said this garrulous youth, who had entirely forgotten his cultivated, reticent manner in meeting this old friend, 'she pretends to be greatly hurt, and thinks it cruel and heart-breaking and

all the rest of it; but that's only her fun, don't you know? She's precious glad to get out of it, that's my belief; and nobody knew better than herself he wouldn't do at all. Finished? Come and have a game of billiards then.'

They went upstairs to a long, low-roofed apartment, in which were two tables. They lit cigars, chose their cues, and fell to work. Frank King had not played half-a-dozen strokes when Mr. Tom said, generously—

'I will put you on thirty points.'

They played five minutes longer.

'Look here, I will give you another thirty.'

'Sixty in a hundred?' said King, laughing. 'Well, that is rather a confession of bad play.'

'Oh, as for that,' said Mr. Tom, 'I

don't see that a naval officer should be ashamed of playing badly at billiards. He should be proud of it. I shan't glory in it if I beat you.'

Mr. Tom was really very friendly. After a couple of games or so he said—

'Look here, it's nearly four o'clock. I am going down to Brighton by the 4.30. Will you come down and see my mother and the girls? I am afraid we can't put you up; but you can get a bed-room at the Norfolk or Prince's; and we dine at eight.'

Frank King hesitated for a minute or two. Ever since he had come to England he had had a strange wish to see Nan Beresford, even though he had heard she was going to be married. He wished to see whether she had turned out to be what he had predicted to himself; whether she

retained those peculiar distinctions of character and expression and manner that had so attracted him; somehow he thought he would like just to shake hands with her for a moment, and see once before him those clear, blue-gray, shy, humorous eyes. But this proposal was too sudden. His heart jumped with a quick dismay. He was not prepared.

Nevertheless, Tom Beresford insisted. Was Captain King staying at a hotel? No; he had got a bed-room in Cleveland Row. That was the very thing; they could stop the hansom there on their way to Victoria Station. The girls would be glad to see him. They had always been watching his whereabouts abroad, in the Admiralty appointments in the newspapers.

At last, with some little unexpressed

dread, Frank King consented; and together they made their way to Victoria Station.

'You know,' said Mr. Tom, apologetically, in the Pullman, 'I've been talking a lot about my sisters; but I tell you honestly I don't see any girls to beat them anywhere. I don't. The Sentimental is rather stupid, perhaps; but then she scores by her music. Nan's the one for my money, though. She isn't the prettiest; but set her down at any dinner table, and you can lay odds on her against the field. I believe there are a dozen old gentlemen who have got her name in their will—not that she cares for worldly things any more—it is all sanctity now. I wish to goodness somebody would——'

But Mr. Tom had a little discretion. He said no more.

'I suppose they are all very much

changed in appearance,' Frank King said, thoughtfully. 'I shouldn't be surprised if I scarcely recognised them.'

'Oh, yes, they are. And I will confess that Nan has improved in one way. She isn't as cheeky as she used to be; she's awfully good-natured—she'd do anything for you. When I get into trouble, I know Nan will be my sheet-anchor.'

'Then I hope the cable will hold,' said Frank King.

They reached Brighton. Tom Beresford found his companion strangely silent and preoccupied. The fact was that Captain Frank was very unusually agitated. He hoped she might not be alone. Then he strove to convince himself that she must be quite altered now. She must be quite different from the young girl who walked up the Splügen pass with him.

Then she was scarcely over seventeen; now she was over twenty. He would see some one he might fail to recognise; not the Nan of former days; not the Nan that had long ago enchained him with her frank odd ways, and her true eyes.

They drove first to a hotel, and secured a bed; then they went to Brunswick Terrace. When they went upstairs to the drawing-room, they found it empty.

'They can't be all out,' said Mr. Tom; 'I'll go and find them.'

He left; and Captain Frank began to try to quiet down this uncalled-for perturbation. Why should he fear to see her? The past was over. Never was any decision given more irrevocably; even if there had been any question as to an open future, that had been disposed of by the news that had met him on his return to England. It ought

only to be a pleasure to him to see her. He thought she would welcome him in a kind way; and he would show her that he quite accepted circumstances as they were. Only—and this he kept repeating to himself—he must expect to be disillusionised. Nan would no longer be that former Nan. Some of the freshness and the young wonder would be gone; she would be eligible as a friend; that, on the whole, was better.

Well, the door opened, and he turned quickly, and then his heart jumped. No; she had not changed at all, he said to himself, as she advanced towards him with a smile and a frankly extended hand. The same pleasant eyes, the same graceful, lithe figure, the same soft voice, as she said—

'Oh, how do you do, Captain King?'

And yet he was bewildered. There was something strange.

'I—I am very glad to see you again, Miss Anne,' he stammered.

She looked at him for a moment, puzzled, and then she said, with a quiet smile,—

'Oh, but I'm not Nan. I see you have forgotten me. I'm Madge.'

END OF VOL. I.

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